



Haruki Kuou

Illustration by
konomi

1

Liar, Liar

Apparently, the
Lying Transfer Student
Dominates Games by **Cheating**





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C O N T E N T S

Liars!

Apparently, the Lying Transfer Student
Dominates Games by Cheating



Prologue

Lies, Fiction, and the Declaration of War

Chapter 1

The Liars Meet and Clash

Chapter 2

The Fake Seven Star Is Born

Chapter 3

Sharing the Front Lines

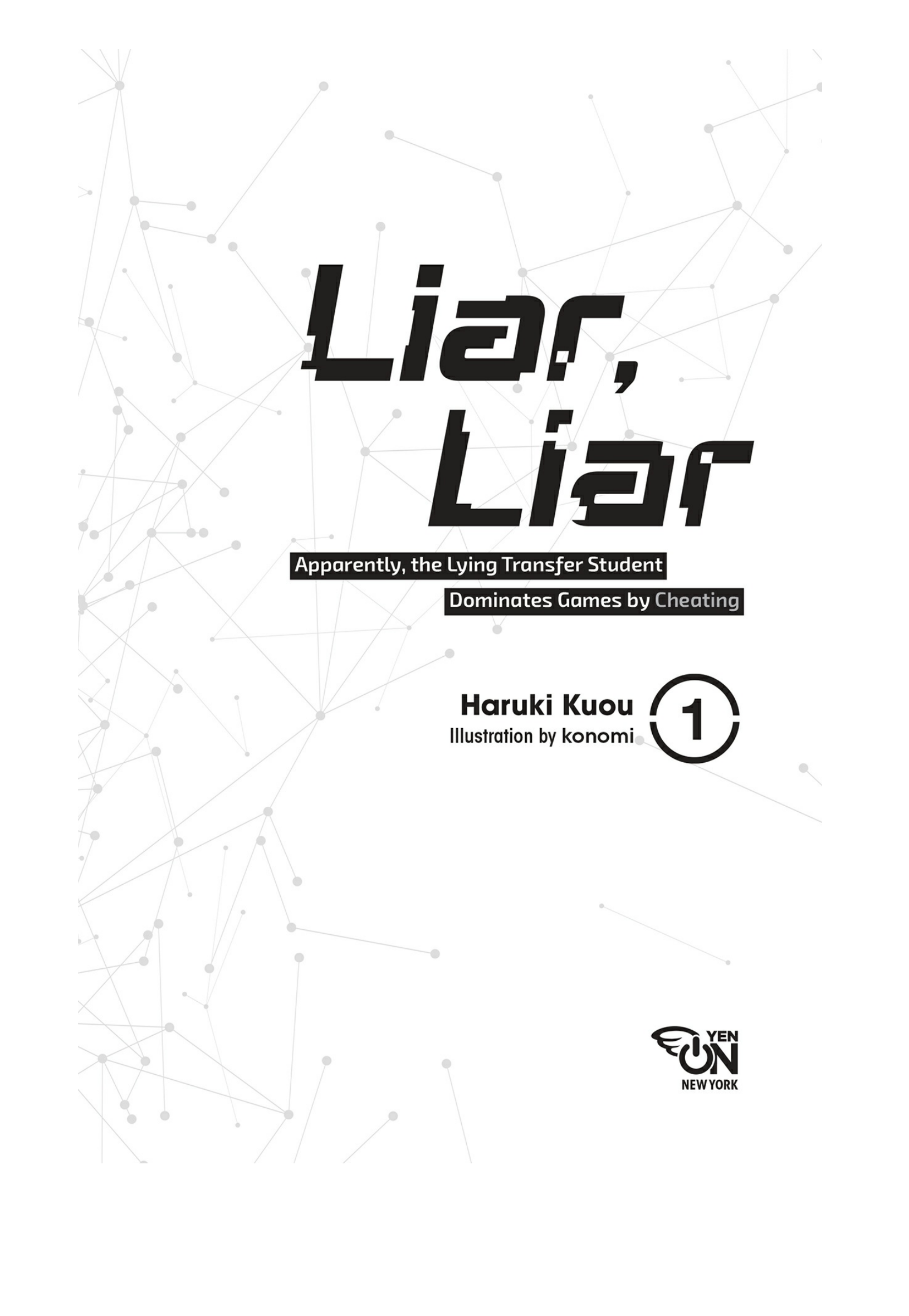
Chapter 4

Rashness, Recklessness, and Uncontrolled Mayhem

Final Chapter

The Lying Genius

Epilogue



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Liar, Liar



Apparently, the Lying Transfer Student Dominates Games by Cheating

Haruki Kuou

Translation by Kevin Gifford

Cover art by konomi

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Liar • Liar Vol. 1 USOTSUKI TENKOSEI WA IKASAMACHEATCHAN TO GAME WO SEISURU SODESU

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Contents

[Cover](#)

[Insert](#)

[Title Page](#)

[Copyright](#)

[Prologue: Lies, Fiction, and the Declaration of War](#)

[Chapter 1: The Liars Meet and Clash](#)

[Chapter 2: The Fake Seven Star Is Born](#)

[Chapter 3: Sharing the Front Lines](#)

[Chapter 4: Rashness, Recklessness, and Uncontrolled Mayhem](#)

[Final Chapter: The Lying Genius](#)

[Epilogue](#)

[Afterword](#)

[Yen Newsletter](#)

Prologue

Lies, Fiction, and the Declaration of War

#

My new leather shoes tapped against the floor. I didn't need to turn around—I could sense on my skin that tens of thousands of eyes watched my every move.

It was customary at the welcome ceremony here at Shiki Island, aka the Academy, for the first-year student who had earned the top score in their year's admissions exam to give a short speech. That's generally how they wrapped up the main program, with the speaker often greeted by little more than some sparse applause along the way. But now, there was a kind of heat filling the auditorium like nothing before during the day's proceedings.

"..."

My steps echoed softly as I walked up to the microphone, breezing my way through the intense atmosphere effortlessly. After a small breath, I looked around. I'd heard this was the largest auditorium on the island, but it seemed like every seat was occupied. A few audience members spoke in hushed tones with their friends. Some were yawning like they wanted to be elsewhere, and a few were playing with devices. But even those uninterested in this ceremony were clearly paying close attention to me.

Of course, that was to be expected. As the person introducing me explained, I was the student who had gotten the highest score ever recorded in the history of the Academy's entrance exam, one of the most difficult tests in the country. Then I'd followed it up on my very first day by doing the unthinkable. I'd become the highest ranked on the island in an instant. The quickest rise to the rank of Seven Star in Academy history; the most promising rookie of all time; the name on everybody's lips after he'd taken down the previous year's unbeatable champion in one day...

Of course, it was all a lie.

Ohhh... Oh man, I think my heart's gonna stop. Why am I here? What am I doing?

Most of the information the emcee gave to the audience was complete bullshit. In fact, the only facts in that intro were my name and gender. The truth was that I'd just barely passed my classes, I wasn't a Seven Star, and I wasn't even *close* to being the strongest here. In fact, the school had told me I'd scored the lowest out of the entire student body. I was a minnow among minnows. I didn't even register as a face in the crowd.

But apparently, no one had been informed of that. We had to keep these lies going at all costs. So, doing whatever I could to calm my racing heart, I smiled and opened my mouth.

"...Hey, everyone. My name's Hiroto Shinohara, and I'm your new Seven Star. First of all, let me say that my reign over this island as a Seven Star will last my whole time here. I have zero intention of giving those stars up to that little miss, or anyone else, for that matter. Oh, but if you don't like that, you can always challenge me, okay? I'm always ready for a Game with any would-be opponent. Of course, that assumes you don't mind getting smashed into a pulp."

I wrapped up my speech, trying to sound as inflammatory as possible. I'm *pretty* sure my voice wasn't trembling at all.

"...Phew..."

The auditorium was already starting to buzz about my tradition-bucking speech as I stepped away from the lectern. A tireless smile spread across my face, but in my mind regret and worry churned.

Oh man, I really said all that. Am I insane? Or just stupid? No, I definitely just have to be stupid. No way I can go back on any of this until it's all over.

Well...yeah. That was the problem. I'd have to fool everyone for the next two years until I finally graduated. This lie would have to hold up, and I'd need to do whatever it took to protect it.

So how had it come to this? It all goes back to earlier that morning...



The Academy

The Academy (official name: Shiki Island) is a man-made island built at a point several hundred miles south-southeast of Tokyo Bay.

It is home to a single large city divided into twenty districts, with a total population of approximately one million (around half of which are students).

Touting itself as an institution for “educating true elites,” it has countless numbers of great achievers among its alumni, thanks in no small part to the “Games” it encourages students to wage against one another.

Chapter 1

The Liars Meet and Clash

#

“Yawwwn...”

It was Wednesday, April 6. I stifled several yawns as I walked along a mostly barren street in the pleasant, quintessentially springlike weather. It was a little after eight, and although it'd typically be a bit eerie for a town to be *this* quiet in the morning, I reasoned that it was understandable enough here, given the unique nature of this place.

An atlas would tell you I was on Shiki Island, but it was more often called simply “the Academy.” It was an aquafloat, an artificial island, one built a few hundred miles south-southeast of Tokyo Bay. Apparently, this small island had been funded by some massive conglomerate way back when with the goal of “educating true elites” or whatever. However, the system they'd devised had produced results beyond what anyone had expected, creating a seemingly never-ending flow of top-level graduates. This had led to huge crowds of people joining the project. Now the island was home to a pretty large city divided into twenty districts, or wards. By the way, the total population was presently at around a million, half of whom were students. As a newcomer, I found it tough to wrap my head around.

“Okay, the official opening is tomorrow. It's just this ‘welcome to the island’ ceremony this afternoon... Still feels pretty much like spring break to me. No wonder I'm the only one out this early.”

I thought back to what I'd read in the school guidebook and sighed. Normally, I'd be trying to grab a few more minutes of sleep as well. I'd finished submitting all the paperwork and stuff for my school admission the day before, and I had planned to take it easy today... But thanks to the constant rain for the past two days, the ferries to the Academy had been delayed. I hadn't made it here until

ten the previous night, and by the time customs finally released me, it was past midnight. Obviously, I was in no mood to hit the school at that point, so now my whole schedule was delayed by a day.

Being a newcomer and all, I wanted to attend the welcome event that afternoon. To do so, I had to finish a bunch of little errands before noon rolled around. And that's why I was presently headed for Eimei School, a private institute located in the Fourth Ward of the Academy. I'd actually spent the previous night at a cheap hotel in the Fourth Ward since I hadn't completed the move-in procedure. It was in the same district, so I had figured I'd locate the school after a little wandering, but...

"...Man, I think I'm lost."

Finding the school was going to take a while. This whole island wasn't even on Google Maps. Maybe there was something on the device they had given me at island customs (they'd mentioned it was "a must" here, I think). But I'd been so exhausted and seasick the night before that I couldn't tell you how to turn the thing on yet.

Despite my age, I was like a toddler lost in the neighborhood. It was enough to make you cry, don't you think?

"...Hmm?"

Then, just as I was hanging my head helplessly, I spied someone. A girl was walking on the other side of the road. Judging by her uniform, we didn't go to the same school. I typically would've been pretty timid in this sort of scenario, but I wasn't getting anywhere alone. Plus, the prospect of my first encounter with a local resident (or should I call them "islanders"?) created this odd sort of excitement that pushed me on. I all but sprinted across the street as I called to her.

"H-hey, um...!"

"...? Oh. Um, me?"

The girl turned around and raised an eyebrow at the slightly out-of-breath kid before her. That didn't make it any easier for me to breathe. I was almost gasping for air now. That's how much of a true *beauty* she was, like something

out of a fantasy novel. She was a bit taller than average for a girl her age. Her hair—a luxuriant shade of red—ran straight down to her waist. There was an atmosphere around her that all but screamed of her upper-class roots, and her eyes, now fixed upon me, were the purest shade of ruby. Those eyes seemed to express both nobility and strength simultaneously. Just looking into them made me feel as though I might be sucked in. I'd describe her face as more gorgeous than cute, I think. Ten out of ten people, regardless of gender, would immediately fall in love with her. Her slender figure reminded me of a fashion model, and her dazzling, amply exposed thighs seemed dizzily provocative to me, even though she wasn't sporting a miniskirt.

Plus...

Hmm. Have I seen her somewhere before? Maybe she was on the Academy's website?

For a brief moment, I felt something like nostalgia. My brow furrowed. The website explanation seemed most likely to me. Anyone this captivating could be an ambassador for a tourism department. Even if her photo was stuffed into the forty-seventh page of the travel guide, she'd still be one of the most memorable things in it.

"Uh... Did you need something? Because I need to get going..."

"Oh, my bad... Um. Sorry, I mean. I *do*, yes. Need something, that is."

This elicited little more than a look of concern from her. Hurriedly, I banished all my less-than-proper thoughts.

"Um... So actually, I only just got to this island last night, and I'm a little lost. Do you know how to get to Eimei School in the Fourth Ward?"

"Oh, that's all? Ha-ha. You don't have to be so nervous about something like that. You're a second-year, right? That makes you the same age as me."

"Ah...I am? Wait, how did you know?"

"Because there's a feature on our devices that tells us. You can find out the name and school of any student on the Academy, as long as they're the same year as you or lower. You really didn't know? They're supposed to teach you how to use your device before anything else."

“Uhhh... I remember someone went over stuff, but I was pretty sick at the time. My main focus was breathing... And, y’know, I’m the kind of guy who skips tutorials anyway...”

“Hee-hee! Sure, sure. So you’re asking random people for help instead? All right. Can I see your device really quick?”

She gave me an elegant chuckle as I pulled my Academy device out of my pocket. I didn’t know how to turn the thing on, so it was little more than this oblong object with a time display on the outside. The girl took my hand and guided my index finger toward a small depression at the top of the screen. It felt cold, interrupting my thoughts for a moment. An instant later, the device started up with a soft sound; I guess it had accepted my authentication or whatever.

“...You see? That’s how you activate it. Beyond that, it’s mostly like any other smartphone.”

“...”

I kept it hidden, but I was feeling pretty defeated. The girl kept talking in her gentle way.

“There’s a blue icon on the bottom, right? That’s your map. Some of the details are different, but you can basically treat it as an island-specific Google Maps.”

“Oh...okay. If I knew this, I wouldn’t have gotten lost in the first place.”

“Well, that’s your fault for not listening to the rundown, isn’t it? That’s called just deserts.”

“You’re right. I can’t even defend myself.”



I half grinned. The girl joined me, smiling herself. She was just...such a nice girl. I don't want to get caught up in clichés like *and that's how I fell in love at first sight* or whatever, but she did a lot to stoke my feelings. I was glad to have met her.

"Okay, I gotta get going. I was on my way to do some shopping. Take care, all right?"

"S-sure."

She waved at me, smiling warmly, as I basked in happiness. That little gesture was so charming that I thought to say something more than "Thanks," but I stopped myself and kept it to that.

That should've been the end of my exchange with the girl whose name I hadn't learned. But...

"...Huh?"

A loud noise filled my ears. My attention quickly turned to the street. The Academy's population was notably almost 60 percent students. There were far fewer cars on the road than in mainland Japan. That didn't mean zero traffic, however. The guidebook had mentioned that I was likely to see heavy vehicles all around, busily handling construction.

And here came one of them now.

Out of the corner of my eye, I saw a large truck coming from the direction the red-haired girl was going. She and I were both on the sidewalk, but let me remind you that the island had suffered a two-day rainstorm, one hard enough that my ferry was delayed for twelve hours. That meant a lot of standing water on the street. And when a truck like this, perfect for transporting would-be heroes to other worlds, passed through that water, it was easy to predict what would happen.

Oh crap!

I dashed forward, catching up to the girl and taking her hand. Forcefully, but not enough so to hurt her, I pulled her away from the danger.

"Hey!"

As for the results... Well, it was very much a “Did I ask for your help?” kind of thing. After all, the moment I took her hand, she was already veering right to avoid the splash of water from the truck. It was at that moment, when she was off-balance, that I pulled her away.

The result...

“Ahhhh?!”

“Whoa!”

Two muffled shouts and a splash could be heard. Then all that remained was the sound of the engine as the truck fled the scene without a trace of guilt.

I opened my eyes cautiously, only to find the scene more stimulating than expected.

“...”

The red-haired girl, her wrist still in my hand, had been yanked down to the asphalt road. Her whole body was soaking wet, which meant the water had gotten her head first. Her long hair clung to her cheeks and neck, and her skirt was stuck to her thighs. The white blouse peeking through her blazer was drenched and just a little bit transparent. It was, to sum up, a sorry scene.

“Ah... Err...”

The girl was right before my eyes. That wasn’t a figure of speech; it was the best way to describe that sort of proximity. Her mouth hung open, and her cheeks gradually reddened. I guess her brain was having trouble processing what had happened, because the embarrassment was only just crashing down on her.

As for me...

Wha...what am I gonna do?! I gotta explain this somehow, and fast!

On the surface, I was staring at her straight-faced, but inside, I was about to explode from sheer panic. I thought to get on my hands and knees and apologize as hard as I could. However, I’d heard somewhere that an apology was a tacit admission of guilt, especially with easily misunderstood body contact like this. Being too free with my apologies could be counterproductive. Perhaps

I ought to play the gentleman and lend her some of my clothes? That was off the table, too. It opened up the question of what we'd do with her wet uniform. If I offered to wash it and give it back later, I'd surely be a dead man.

So what's my next move, then?

"Oww... How long are you just gonna stare at me like...like that?!"

"Wha—?!"

While I mulled over my options, the bright-red girl shoved me away with all her might. Upon reflection, I could've stepped away from her a little bit before anything else. I was way too oblivious.

"Huff...huff..."

While I wallowed in a light bath of shame, the girl breathed heavily, clutching herself. Then, after a few seconds, her eyes of pure ruby bored into me with a sharpness that made her earlier calm, friendly demeanor seem like a total front.

"Look...was that *really* a coincidence? Or did you plan that from the start?"

"Huh? I didn't plan... What's that even mean? Of course it was a coincidence."

"Oh yeah? I don't know. You don't look the least bit disturbed about any of this. This whole interaction's been weird. You're totally clueless about a device everybody here has, you're a Fourth Ward student but you're in the Third Ward for some reason...and that truck wasn't from the Fourth Ward, either. It'd make a lot of sense if the driver was in on this whole thing with you."

"...What?!"

The girl was mumbling all this with her wet right hand over her mouth. Honestly, I didn't know whom that truck belonged to, and I couldn't have cared less. But...in *her* eyes, I guess this was an open-and-shut conspiracy!

"N-no, you've got it all—"

"Uh-uh. I don't want to hear your excuses. Besides, I'm sure you were going to hu...*humiliate* me, have your way with me, sexually assault me, you name it. But I'm not gonna let that happen. Okay? Because if you want to have a *Game*, I'll take you on right now. *You're* an Academy student, so if you want a piece of me, you'll have to take it fair and square!"

This drenched, furious girl was now all but daring me to agree. She was caught up in a fit of rage, and the more adult-oriented implications in her tirade unnerved me a bit. Despite feeling a little overpowered, I tried to trace my memories back a little.

The Game system was one of the unique aspects of life on the Academy, part of what made it a site for elite education. I need to cover something else first before I can explain it, though.

Here on the Academy, there were things called stars—grades assigned to students, almighty numbers. These created a statistics-based caste system for students. Different people viewed it differently, but basically, it was an assortment of ranks. Stars were given to the high school–age students on the island, all 150,000 or so. The scale went from one to seven stars, and your star count—in essence, your social standing—determined the sorts of benefits you received.

That was the long and short of it: It was an Academy-sanctioned way to discriminate among groups of students. For example, shops on the street restricted entry based on rank. Students with more stars had preferential access to public transport, and your star count even determined the stipend transferred to your account each month, which was paid in the island's exclusive e-currency. A single star was more precious than gold, because it alone had a major impact on the lifestyle you enjoyed. That's basically how people saw things (according to the Shiki Island guidebook).

Unsurprisingly, this meant that Academy students spent a lot of time obsessing over stars. That easily quantifiable number—not your looks, brains, or talent—measured your worth. Earning an extra star allowed you to rub shoulders with a higher class of student, but losing one spelled banishment to the very clique you'd looked down on previously.

To be frank, it was a pretty drastic approach to instilling values like competitiveness, class consciousness, and aspiration in students. The system generated a lot of heated debate among the general public, but there was little doubt that it was an integral part of the program that produced so many outstanding graduates.

Generally, there were three ways to obtain stars. First, your school could award them when you enrolled or went up a grade, based on academic performance, and so forth. Second, you could receive one for an excellent performance at one of the large-scale events held on the island. Third, and this was by far the most accessible and common approach, you could hold a Game with someone. Winning meant stealing a star from your opponent. Given the value of stars in Academy life, people placed high importance on Gaming.

If she's challenging me to a Game right now, she must be pretty confident she can beat me...or her chances of losing are so low that she doesn't even need to worry.

The thought made me take a surreptitious and deep inhalation. If she was that capable, there was no way a brand-new transfer like me stood a chance. I grasped only the broadest outline of the system. I didn't even know how you challenged someone yet. This was totally hopeless, but...

"Um... Look, once this Game is over, do you promise to at least listen to what I have to say?"

"Huh? What you have to say? ...Oh, did you finally think up your excuse? Fine. Sure, I'll hear you out, but I might not believe you."

"Okay. I'm cool with this, then."

With that, I casually accepted the challenge on the spot. As long as she kept that promise, I didn't really care how this turned out. She could beat me up all she liked.

According to the red-haired girl, you had to have a lower rank than your opponent to challenge them to a Game. I'd only just learned how to start up my device, but I immediately figured out how to kick a Game off. The icon was right in the center of the home screen, as conspicuous as it could possibly be. I tapped it, then hit the *Request Game* button. It responded with a *Searching for nearby devices...* window. Not even a few seconds later, it detected a device—grade unknown, owner unknown. Everything was unknown because I didn't have access to info about people ranked higher than I, but based on the position of the pin, it had to be this girl.

I moved from screen to screen, following the instructions to complete the

challenge.

“Okay, request sent.”

“...Yeah. I just accepted it. As for what we’ll do... Oh.”

She was silent for a bit, staring at her device. When she looked up, she appeared unsure. Something bothered her to the point where she wasn’t speaking. Eventually, she managed to get her pink lips open.

“I’m sure you don’t need to be told this...but it’s usually up to the Raider—the challenger—to decide what the Game will be. It wouldn’t be fair at all if the Keeper, the higher-ranked player, got to choose. The Raider’s got an advantage in that way. But—heh-heh—you’ve seriously underestimated me.”

“Huh?”

“Still playing dumb? You left the Game details box blank when you sent your challenge. That’s all but saying, ‘I’m so capable of beating you at anything that I don’t even care, so we can play whatever you want.’ And...I’ll have you know, nobody’s ticked me off like this in a really long time.”

“?! ”

No, no, I was just tapping at stuff and the screen changed! That’s all!!

Externally, I was frozen, but inside, I piled on the excuses. Still, this girl firmly believed that I’d neglected to specify a Game type to taunt her. She glared at me like I’d killed her dog. If I told her, “Actually, that was a mistake,” it would only make things worse.

Well...whatever. Let’s roll with it.

“If that’s how you want to interpret it, go right ahead. What’re we gonna play?”

“Y-you *love* making fun of me, don’t you? All right. Give me a minute. I’ll get everything set up.” She all but spit the words at me, looking away, obviously provoked.

A Game on the Academy could apparently be whatever you wanted. Our devices were equipped with constant monitoring systems that rejected anything judged to be unfair or overly hazardous, but virtually anything else

could work. The result? Most Games were original inventions, designed so the Raider would go in with a notable advantage—and the Game the girl presented me with three minutes later was a classic example.

“‘Enhanced Turn-Based Stone-Faced Contest’?”

“That’s right. It’s a powered-up version of a kids’ game. The way you normally play it, whoever laughs first loses, but here, you lose if your expression changes at all. Smile, cry, laugh, scream, do anything else—if any kind of emotion appears on your face, you’re out. Our devices have face sensors on them, so if the on-screen meter goes past the trigger point, you’re done.”

“Oh... Okay. What does ‘turn-based’ mean?”

“Exactly what it says. You and I will take turns. On your turn, you can’t lose, no matter what face you make. You’re free to do whatever you want with your expression to get me to break. In other words, you’re on offense during your turn. We’ll switch every sixty seconds.”

“...Neat.”

Considering how angry the girl was, this was kind of cute. Or maybe *interesting* was the better word.

During the Enhanced Turn-Based Stone-Faced Contest, you could make any face you liked on your turn. The goal was to make your opponent change expression as soon as possible.

“All right. Let’s get this Game started, then.”

“Ah... Are you sure? I don’t think you set up Abilities yet.”

“...Abilities?”

Another piece of mystery jargon. I probably should’ve asked...but other people were starting to pass by. My primary goal was to get this over with quickly. If I had to apologize on my hands and knees, I wanted the smallest audience possible.

So I decided to shake my head. “Oh... Nah, that’s okay. I figure I can make it through this as I am.”

“...?! You what?!”

I barely got the words out before the red-haired girl reacted in the most exaggerated way. Both of her hands were shaking, and her ruby eyes drilled into me.

“Hmm. So you think you can beat me without using any Game apps to weaken me? Wow...”

...I just made a terrible mistake, didn't I?

“Heh... Heh-heh-heh... All right. Fine, then. Perfect. In that case, let's get this started, just like you want. You're going to regret making a fool out of me!”

With that declaration, the girl raised her right hand. Then, with a soft beep, my device's display switched to a window that read *The Game has begun*. A projection emerged from the screen, expanding next to us. It showed icons of our faces, the remaining time for the current turn, a meter indicating the defender's facial expression, and so on.

“Whoa... I heard about this, but seeing it in person's pretty impressive.”

Seeing this play out like something from a video game astonished me. The Academy's tech really was way ahead of the mainland's. I wanted to explore this in greater depth, but this wasn't the time for it.

According to the faces displayed on the scoreboard, I was the first attacker.

“...Okay, the Game begins with your turn. It'll switch over to mine without any warning after a minute, so you better watch the clock.”

The girl had the most natural, quiet look on her face as she explained. She had chosen the Game, so she was likely confident about controlling her emotions. I suppose the same could be said of me, too, but if we just sat here stoic, the Game would never end. While I considered my first move, the girl, now standing a couple of feet from me, suddenly spoke up again.

“I'm the only one who will get a full minute for my turn. Activate Variable Control, level seven! Limit my opponent's turn to *one-tenth* of normal!”

“Wha...?”

Her red hair bounced as she made the declaration, and the projected display quickly reacted. There were time bars above our face icons, and mine was

reduced to six seconds.

Wait. Six?!

“Hey! Isn’t that way too mean?!”

“Hmm? What’re you talking about? It’s not mean at all. In fact, it’s one of the most basic Abilities you can use. I guess you didn’t bother installing any, but...”

“...!”

It was more *couldn’t* than *didn’t*, but I remained silent.

A few seconds later, a click announced that it was now the girl’s turn. She, of course, had a full minute, not six seconds. It was beyond unfair...but as I said earlier, controlling my emotions wasn’t too much of an issue for me. I wasn’t sure what would happen if this dragged on, but I felt sure I’d be able to weather a few turns.

“Hee-hee! That’s not all, you know! Activate Creation: EX!”

...Or maybe not.

An unimaginable sight appeared before me. The device in the girl’s hand gently vibrated, then grew and transformed. A few seconds later, there was no device left at all. Instead, there was a long, thin sword.

“Whoa... What’s that? What’s going on?”

“I *told* you, it’s an Ability. You can transform your device to whatever patterns you program in. This one’s a pretty rare type, so I can’t blame you for not knowing it. Heh-heh... You sure you don’t want to run?”

“...Run?”

“Mm-hmm. I mean, with a weapon...I can do things like this!”

The girl smiled and charged at me. I wondered why, but ignored the question. Any change in expression would make me lose. All she had to do was make me feel something—fear, surprise, whatever. That sword couldn’t actually hurt me (that’s what I chose to believe, anyway), but its sharp, imposing presence alone threatened to throw me off. My mind raced as I barely evaded her blade. I didn’t know how sensitive my device’s face detection system was, but there

was a chance a mere quickened breath would knock me out of the competition. If so, I'd have only six seconds, my turn, to catch my breath.

Damn. What kind of Game is this?! Is she some kind of super genius?!

Only now had I reached that conclusion, but I couldn't act on it much. The red-haired girl I'd inadvertently picked a fight with was incredibly sharp and much more accustomed to these Games than I was. If I had to guess, she was probably a celebrity on this island. I could tell because the passersby all stopped to watch, some of them looking awed and offering verbal encouragement. I was completely set up to be the villain, and that made this incredibly hard to deal with.

Yeah... Maybe I oughtta just lose this quickly. I wanted to hold out for longer, since I reasoned the girl would get angrier upon realizing I wasn't taking this seriously, but if our audience grew any larger, it'd just be a huge embarrassment for—

Oh... Hang on.

A change stopped my train of thought. Out of nowhere, the girl's attack stopped. She had nearly twenty seconds left in her turn, but for some reason, she kept her distance from me, eyes cast downward. She scanned the area around her...almost fearfully. The seconds ticked away until it was my go again.

If that had been all, I might have chalked it up to her taking a moment to catch her breath. However, the anomaly didn't end there.

"Mmm... Nn. Nngh..."

She kept her face unaffected, but with all the groaning and squirming, there was clearly something amiss. She was trying her hardest to hide it, but her ears poking from her damp hair were bright red.

"Hahhh... Okay! My turn!"

The effects of Variable Control meant that my turn ended in the blink of an eye, but unlike before, I didn't feel too panicked about it. The girl was obviously feeling off. She still had that sword out, but she wasn't trying to swing it around—in fact, her right hand was over her chest, as if to guard it.

Oh... Could it be?

It finally dawned on me. I turned my face upward. The girl was preoccupied with *that*. She was worried her wet clothes might reveal her skin. Rage had driven her to start a Game with no one around, but now a small crowd had gathered, and the shame was setting in. The truck had passed a little while before, so I wasn't sure anything was visible to the onlookers. But, and this was key, her clothes weren't dry. At the very least, they definitely felt sopping wet to her. I couldn't blame her for getting self-conscious.

"Nh...!"

The crowd grew with each new turn, and her embarrassment compounded every second. Before long, she was hardly doing anything on her turns. Her sword was still raised, yet she used it to conceal her upper body more than anything else. Occasionally, she rubbed her thighs together in a display of what I took to be bashfulness. People started to whisper, voicing concerns. However, they never could have guessed what was wrong unless they had seen the truck douse her.

By the end of the girl's fourth turn, she just stood there, head down and shoulders visibly shaking. Unable to hold it back, she stabbed her sword into the ground, then crouched behind it as though to use it for cover. Her face burned red.

"Ngh!! I can't take this anymooooooooore!!"

Her scream, powered by all the strength she could muster, echoed across the street. Clearly, there was nothing normal about her behavior...and it was more than enough to set off the face detection meter.

"...Beep! Change in facial expression detected from Sarasa Saionji. Game end conditions met. Possession of Sarasa Saionji's star will now be transferred to Hiroto Shinohara."

The robotic voice droned from both our devices, announcing the end of a Game that had been short but had seemed to last forever.

Sarasa Saionji? The family name sounded kind of familiar, but I had bigger issues to deal with.

I won... Now she's going to hate me even more. Why the hell did I have to win? I'm so stupid. She mostly defeated herself, but this can't be good for me...

My mind was racing too fast to string a coherent thought together. Honestly, I'd never even considered the possibility that I'd actually win. My initial plan had been to let her beat me, get on her good side a little, and then apologize, but it was way too late for that. I felt more concerned than I had before.

While I was busy worrying, the audience, which had kept eerily silent, suddenly erupted in a burst of activity.

"...What?"

"Wait... Wait, wait, wait, wait!"

"Y-you're kidding! Saionji lost?!"

"This—th-this is unthinkable! I can't believe Miss Sarasa lost to someone like him! Never!"

"Deny it all you want, but she did. I can't believe it, either, but..."

"Oh, wowwwwwww! The Empress has lost so early in the school year... Who could've predicted this?! Who is he, even? Some hidden freak of nature from the Fourth Ward?!"

"...What?"

The audience shot from zero to a thousand instantly. I couldn't keep up with them, and my head listlessly tilted to one side. By stringing together the snippets of information I heard, I worked out that the ruby-eyed girl was famous and high ranking. Was that enough to get people so worked up?

It's clearly a big deal to everyone. I might never be able to make this right. This all began as a series of misunderstandings and coincidences. If we can talk this out, maybe I can negate the match...

I nodded a little, then walked up to the girl, who was still crouching down.

"...!"

She lifted her face, and I thought she might glare again, but then I realized she was white as a sheet. All the shame from before was gone. Her eyes bored into

mine again. Her expression showed a mix of regret, anger, and self-hatred, and her lips quivered as a single tear went down her face. It was beyond me to discern the exact meaning behind all this. I'd only just met this girl, after all. This absolutely wasn't the reaction of someone who had only lost one star...but I had no way of knowing what was going on in the background.

“...Move.”

After staring at me for a few moments while trying to say something, the girl finally uttered a single word as she stood. Then she walked off, staggering one way, then the other like a zombie.

Wh-what should I do? What should I do, what should I do? Seriously, what am I supposed to do?!

Judging by the situation, I was clearly at fault, but beyond that, I was utterly in the dark. What was the problem, and why was she crying? My confusion and panic climbed so high I couldn't think anymore. Someone had to explain things to me!

As if in answer to my thoughts (although I knew that was impossible), a black car drove over and stopped in front of me. An old man in a tuxedo hopped out, a gentle smile on his face. He brought his right hand to his chest, bowed deeply to me, and spoke in a kindly, elderly voice.

“...Are you Mr. Hiroto Shinohara? Please come with me. The provost is waiting for you.”

#

I rode in the butler-like old man's car for ten or so minutes. According to him, I was being taken to school.

The Fourth Ward's Eimei School had an enormous campus that housed nearly twenty thousand students, from elementary to university age. It retained a top spot in the rankings that measured schools on the island against one another in assorted ways. My guidebook described it as an “elite organization that combines a relatively loose school environment with a unique devotion to Gaming.”

And now here I was in the provost's office, the very core of this institute.

After being led here, I was directed to have a seat on an almost scarily plush sofa.

The young woman seated across from me began our meeting with a deep sigh.

“Ugh... I swear, do you have any idea what you’ve *done* on your first day here?”

“Um...”

I cautiously lifted my head at those exasperated words. The woman didn’t look pleased, and I wasn’t going to get out of this by ignoring her.

This was Natsume Ichinose, current provost of Eimei School and superintendent of the Fourth Ward of the Academy. She sat there in front of me, leafing through some papers. The only real words to describe her were *adult woman*. A dark-haired beauty who looked great in office attire. She had her legs crossed, despite her risqué tight skirt, and the image she exuded was a mixture of coolness and sweet temptation. However, one’s first impression of her was unlikely to be of either quality. How should I put this? She was *ferocious*, in a way that suggested a sadistic streak. If you classified people as hunters or hunted, she’d undoubtedly be in the first group.

This actually wasn’t the first time I’d met Provost Ichinose. In fact, back when I was still attending school on the mainland—a month ago—she was the one who’d invited me to the Academy. We’d met a few times since then so she could help organize my admissions exam and island visa. I’d been due to visit her first thing at school today before I got delayed, and considering I knew no one on the island yet, this woman before me was about the only person I could rely on for now.

“...Er. Are you referring to the Game I was in?”

“Exactly. So how about I get your side of the story first? Why did you do that?”

“I didn’t do anything. It just kind of happened... Um, but what’s the big problem, exactly? I thought Games took place all the time across the Academy.”

“Yes, of course. Normal Games do. But this one wasn’t normal.” The provost

gave a half smirk. “Listen to me. I want you to understand that you’ve committed a serious taboo. And I’m talking about something beyond a little social faux pas. This was shocking enough to rock the entire island.”

“Huh? I don’t see how it—”

“It can. Read this.”

Provost Ichinose slid a single sheet across the glass table at me. I looked at it, not sure what this was about, then read. Yeah... It was enough to make me sweat from every pore.

“Um... Provost, is this true?”

“It sure is. You were so charmed by her sweetness that you sexually harassed her and made it look like an accident. Then you coerced her into a Game you somehow managed to win... That’s what you said, right?”

“I think you’re maliciously bending some of the details, but that was the result, yes.”

“If that’s how it ended, the exact *process* doesn’t matter. Typically, your victory wouldn’t be a problem. In fact, taking stars from students in other wards is more than welcome, in my opinion. But the opponent you picked... She’s unique.”

I reexamined the paper while the provost spoke. There was a photo of the girl I’d held a Game with printed on the sheet. And the text profile beneath it almost made my eyes pop out.

“She’s a second-year at Ohga School in the Third Ward, high school section. In her admissions exam, she scored the highest in school history, and during her first year, she rose to the topmost rank of Seven Star. She was the only student on the island to achieve this. A lot of people call her Empress, out of both fear and respect. She’s had a perfect record until now, never losing a single Game since her enrollment. That’s Sarasa Saionji, the absolute monarch of this island.”

“...”

“That’s not even all of it. Didn’t it dawn on you when you heard her last

name? The Saionji family counts the founder of the Academy among its ancestors. Her grandfather is Masamune Saionji, the current grand headmaster of the Academy *and* the director of the world-renowned Saionji Group. That makes the young lady you defeated a VIP among VIPs here on the Academy.”

“That’s who she is? And I beat her?”

“Yes. That’s exactly what you did. And here’s where the biggest problem lies... You see, Grand Headmaster Saionji is notorious for being a very rigid man. He’s got a proud streak a mile long, for all the good and bad that brings. And he’s willing to do anything to save face.”

“...?”

“You still don’t get it? Listen, I’m sure this isn’t breaking news to you, but you’re nothing by comparison—a blade of grass on the lawn. You wouldn’t have passed our admissions exam without me grading you on a big curve. A U-turn, really. You’re such a natural-born One Star, it almost makes me wanna cry. And now a blade of grass—a total nobody—has beaten the Saionji family heiress! Ripped a star from her hands! Made her run off in tears! In front of a huge crowd! Ha-ha... If I report this honestly to him, it’ll be a *huge* disaster. He’ll be pissed.”

“Um... Wha...?”

The provost calmly shifted her legs, laughing heartily for some reason. Meanwhile, I was frozen, barely able to reply. Was this truly that serious?

“So...am I gonna get expelled after one day?”

“Expelled? No, no. Not at all.”

“Oh... Right. Yeah, I guess not. That’s a relief, at least—”

“Hmm? Oh, it’s too soon to relax. What I mean is, mere expulsion isn’t nearly enough to make up for this. Are you some kind of glutton for punishment?”

I couldn’t have imagined a more frightening response. I remained frozen, unable to so much as speak while Provost Ichinose continued, sighing here and there as she went.

“For one, you wouldn’t believe how many dark rumors there are about the

grand headmaster. I've lived on this island a long time, and I've had more than a few rivals lose their positions after getting on his bad side. So unless we do something, your life is over. Do you follow me?"

"H-huh?! Wait a minute! What do you mean?!"

"I mean you'll face dire consequences. Do you think anyone is going to accept you once they find out the Saionji family drove you off the island? There'll be no place in modern society for you. You'll be completely exiled. Game over. Understand?"

"You've got to be kidding... And why are you acting like this is funny?!"

"I can't deny that I find it a little amusing."

"You don't have to admit it!"

"Heh-heh... Hold on. There's no need to panic. To tell the truth, I'm calling a board meeting right now to debate what to do with you... Oh, that's a conference for the leaders of all the wards, by the way. You know, the Board of Regents in Ward Zero. Masamune Saionji's the grand headmaster on paper, but as long as he doesn't personally intervene, the board's the highest and only decision-making body on the island. To put it another way, if we keep them quiet, we can propagate any story we want, no matter how irrational. Just give me some time to handle this."

Provost Ichinose stood, still smirking, then took a few elegant steps toward a desk against the wall. There was a desktop PC on it, and I saw a bunch of video chat windows on the screen. It was probably a web conference. She put a finger to her lips, telling me to be quiet, as I watched from beside her. Then she turned on her mic.

"...Sorry to keep you waiting. This is the provost from the Fourth Ward."

"You're late. Far too late. What's the deal?"

"I knew you'd be involved when I heard we were facing disaster this early in the school year, and I was right."

"We need information. All we have are these vague reports about someone defeating the Empress."

“Yes, I’m sure you’re all eager to hear more. The student in question is a new transfer, after all. He hasn’t finished his official paperwork yet, so no matter how deep you drill into the island database, you won’t find anything on him.”

“A new transfer? Right, you recruited a student from the mainland.”

“Who is he? Stop wasting our time and give us details.”

“I think you know more than anyone how unwise it is to annoy the grand headmaster...”

“I know, I know. I’ll explain everything; there’s no need to rush me. The student at the center of all this is named Hiroto Shinohara. I’ll omit the exact course of events for now, but he’s definitely the one who defeated Sarasa Saionji in a Game.”

“Ughh... So the rumors are true?”

“If he’s that new to the island, he can’t be high rank. Someone dirtying the Saionji family heiress’s good name is a huge problem.”

“Word’s already spreading about the fall of the Empress... I really think we need to work out how to respond.”

“Actually...I have some good news for all of you.”

After stating that with a breezy smile, the provost suddenly reached out with her right hand to block the camera above her PC screen with a finger. She turned the mic off at the same time, effectively removing herself from the meeting. Then she flashed an aggressive grin at me.

“All right, Shinohara. I’m giving you two options.”

“...Options?”

“Right. Either of them will be good enough to calm these people down, and I can guarantee that both are completely viable. But depending on which you choose, you may find your life significantly impacted. I’m giving you the right, and responsibility, to make up your own mind.”

“...A-all right. Go ahead.”

“Great to hear. Okay. Your first choice is to take all the blame.”

“...Huh? I thought we were talking about ways to avoid that...”

“We are. We’ll just need to work on *how* you’ll shoulder the responsibility. For example...we could claim you’re connected to certain underground groups in the Eighth Ward. Hiroto Shinohara used some illegal Abilities he picked up from them to beat Sarasa Saionji. That kind of thing. The key point is that you won illegitimately. You’ll be investigated by school authorities, and the Game will be stricken from the record.”

“...”

“...I know that sounds cruel, but in terms of the practical scenarios at our disposal, I think this is the one that’ll leave you the least damaged, okay? You’ll only be punished for a rule infraction. People will take it as a cheat that tricked the Empress into defeat, which won’t harm the Saionji family’s honor. You’ll still wind up exiled from the island, though.”

“Ouch... Okay, what’s the second option?”

“We make you into a Seven Star.”

“...Huh?”

This was beyond unexpected coming from the provost. I know my response made me sound like an idiot, but it was all I could manage.

“You’ll make me...into a Seven Star? I’m not sure what you mean.”

“Figures. You heard the regents. Ultimately, this is a tricky problem because it will cause the Saionji family to lose face. Structurally speaking, it might be a little difficult to comprehend from the outside, but our biggest issue is that you’re too much of a nobody. If she lost to a worthy opponent, then not even the grand headmaster would have a reason to get involved. So we’d use the regents’ argument against them—we’d make you someone on equal footing with the Empress.”

“W-wait a second. I understand the logic, but is that even possible? Seven Star is the best rank on this island, right? There’s only one of them on the island. If we bend the rules to create another one, I think a lot of people will object...”

“No, they won’t. I think you’re missing an important point.” The provost smirked. “The star-hunting system is deeply embedded in the Academy’s core. It’s set up so that no one, not even the grand headmaster, can meddle with it. That prevents crimes, you see. Normally, if you scored a One Star grade on the admissions exam, then you’d be a One Star, no matter how you complained. There’s no ‘bending the rules’ or anything. If you wanted more stars, you’d have to step up and win some Games.”

“So you’re saying that I have no chance at being a Seven Star?”

“Typically, you wouldn’t. But we’re dealing with a pretty unique case here. All right? You just defeated Sarasa Saionji in a Game. That means you took a star from her.”

“Oh, right.”

I supposed that had happened, even if I didn’t do much to win. The person who lost a Game had to relinquish a star to the winner.

Following the provost’s instructions, I looked at my profile page on my device. It listed assorted data about me: my name, age, gender, school, and information on my One Star rank. I’d played a Game before I’d fully completed my school enrollment, so I imagined I was treated as having zero stars when I made the challenge.

“Hey... Is this a bug?”

I showed the screen to the provost, a little confused. The star I’d taken from Sarasa Saionji was red for some reason, with the same kind of ruby sheen as her eyes. It was pretty, but red wasn’t the usual color for a star.

Provost Ichinose shook her head, still smiling confidently while I stood there confused. “No, that’s not a bug. That’s a Unique Star, a special kind of star. Out of all the stars changing hands on this island, only ten or so Unique Stars are known to exist.”

“A Unique Star...?”

“Yeah. It counts as one star just like any other, but having an extra color gives you certain perks. I’ll go into all that later, though. The whole system doesn’t matter as much as the fact that *you* have a red star. Tell me, when you picture

the word *red*, what's the first thing that comes to mind?"

"Red? Um... Ketchup."

"Thanks for that unexpectedly cute answer, but you're wrong. Having a red Unique Star gives you the right to tell *a single lie*. The type that someone might catch you red-handed in otherwise."

"...A lie?" I parroted.

The provost crossed her legs in her tight skirt again.

"Right. To be precise, you've earned the right to have a lie backed up with hard data. Like I said, the Academy's star-hunting system is an ironclad rule, but if you possess a certain star, you get the right to change one piece of data in our computers. For example...I could rewrite your record so your height's listed at six foot one. Then it would be true—as far as the data's concerned, anyway."

"I'm not sure why you're assuming I have a hang-up about my height... Are you telling me I can use this star to handle...this problem?"

"Right, you'd lie your way out of it. Your data says you have only one star, but we can rewrite it so you have seven instead. There's no way to confirm someone's rank unless you look at their handheld device or the database itself, after all. After we change that single field, you'll appear like a Seven Star to everyone on the outside."

"Er, but that's kind of..."

This situation was growing bigger by the second, and alarm bells blared in my head. I frantically searched for some grounds to turn down this suggestion.

"Isn't a new Seven Star transfer student going to look suspicious? If I use a red star to lie about it, I feel like people will find out really quick."

"Not at all. Word will spread fast that you got a red star from Sarasa Saionji, but not all that many people know what a red star can do. They won't be able to figure out it's a lie."

"Wow. Really?"

"Yes. That red star has been hoarded by the Saionji family since long before Sarasa got ahold of it. Plus, given its power, none of its previous owners will be

too keen on saying much. If they do, people will know they've lied as well."

"True... Wait, why do you know about it?"

"Because I used to have that red star myself, obviously. That was way back when I was a student, though."

"..."

Provost Ichinose, whose age I couldn't begin to guess, smirked at me. I was stunned into silence. This red star... A liar's star that let you buck the entire Academy system. The provost was suggesting I use it to become a Seven Star, like Saionji had been.

"So I'd be a fake Seven Star?"

"That's right. The administrators can stare at the data all they want, but all they'll see is that you're a Seven Star. They'll have to keep their mouths shut. And if they let it slide, it'll become the truth for the whole island. Now, the Saionji family knows what the red star can do, but your lie will help them. As long as you don't do anything stupid, that family won't interfere with you. I figure your backstory will be something like, you're a staggering young genius who got the highest admissions exam score ever. The fastest Seven Star in history. That would definitely put you in the same class as the Empress, don't you think?"

She looked right at me, searching for a response. I met her gaze while considering in silence.

Basically, I had two options. As Provost Ichinose said, this was a critical life decision. The first choice would wrap everything up neatly, and I'd have a peaceful life. But in exchange, I'd never be allowed on the Academy again. I'd have to say good-bye forever. The second option, on the other hand, promised change on an epic level. The Academy was home to over 150,000 high school students alone, and they were all potential star hunters. The danger of having an outright faker at the top was immediately apparent. I'd stand out above everyone, become more envied than any other person, and constantly be at risk of being challenged to Games. I'd have to weather it all and look completely normal doing so. Worse yet, I doubted I'd be permitted to fail a single time. Losing meant forfeiting my red star. Once it got out that I'd faked my rank, I'd

be pushed even harder than if I'd done nothing.

However...

"Despite everything that's happened, you've got a goal in life, don't you? That's why you're here, isn't it? You can choose however you like...but if you give up here, I'm sure you'll never see her again."

"So this was all a trap?"

"A trap? No. I couldn't have predicted all of this. But I have a reputation as a stubborn woman. Whether it's a lie, an accident, or a random occurrence, I use everything at my disposal."

It sounded like a partial joke, but she smiled all the way through it. She couldn't simply be messing with me. I knew that because everything she said was completely true. I did have a mission. There was a specific reason I'd abandoned my normal high school life to come here. I had to find someone. And the idea of being kicked out before I made any progress... I couldn't imagine a worse ending.

I really don't enjoy feeling like I'm wrapped around the provost's finger, but...

Ultimately, I decided it didn't matter. Provost Ichinose had her goals, and I had mine. If she wanted to use me, then I'd use her back. Actually, it was more like I was taking advantage of the situation. For now, my remaining on the island was a plus for her, and I needed to take advantage of that.

Fortunately, acting was one of my fortes. To make the most of my time here, I'd have to trick everybody on the island. And that's what I intended to do.

"Hfff..."

So I took a deep breath and gave my answer to the devilish provost. She looked as though she knew my answer already.

"All right. If you want me to be the best out there, then I will!"

#

"Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! Look at you! That was awesome! So awesome! Ah-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!"

"..."

The packed welcome ceremony at the First Ward event hall was over. I was now firmly the highest-ranked student. After all but fleeing the auditorium, I chatted with Provost Ichinose on my device while I returned to the Fourth Ward. Calling it a chat was generous, though. She was just laughing her head off at me, not bothering to listen to my responses.

“Ha-ha... No, really, that was incredible! I never thought you’d go in with that much of a bang!”

“I’m not sure if you’re praising me or mocking me...”

“Praising for sure! I’m singing your praises from the bottom of my heart! I know I’m the one who proposed making you a Seven Star and that I convinced the Board of Regents to accept it, but you created a whole character for yourself in a few hours! That’s a real coup!”

“Th-thanks... Did I really make that much of an impression? Because I thought it sounded pretty normal—”

“‘If you don’t like that, you can always challenge me, okay? Of course, that assumes you don’t mind getting smashed into a pulp.’ And then that sneer... Hee-hee-hee...”

“You’re definitely mocking me!”

I brought a cupped hand to my device, softly shouting so no one would hear. Unlike the provost, I kept myself utterly calm. I was still in the middle of the First Ward, after all. The ceremony had just ended, so there were plenty of people around. That meant there were eyes on me.

“Hey, look...!”

“Whoa, it’s that guy from before. What was his name? He...Hiro Shinohara?”

“Yeah, right. That’d be the lamest name ever. It’s Hiroto, I think.”

“He beat the Empress—Bloody Saionji—right?”

“Yeah. I heard she screamed, ‘I can’t take this anymore!’”

“Whoa! What’d he do to her?! Creepy!”

Anonymous voices reached my ears. With all this attention on me, I couldn’t

risk making a gesture or facial expression and blowing my cover. The strongest student on the Academy always kept it cool. Probably.

“Heh-heh... No, I’m not making fun of you at all. I mean it,” Provost Ichinose assured me. *“It’s why I recruited you in the first place. I fell in love with that aspect of you. I’ve got no reason to pick on you at all. In fact, you’re performing exactly as I hoped you would.”*

“Well, okay, I guess...”

I reluctantly agreed with her.

The “aspect” she’d mentioned was a unique trait of mine—the only one I had, really. I could completely detach my feelings from my expression. No matter how I panicked internally, I’d look utterly calm on the surface. I could laugh while sad or cry on cue even when I felt fine. The provost had called me a “mental swindler.” Anyway, that was what I could do.

“...I never thought that technique would help me like this, though.”

“Yeah, neither did I! I invited you thinking it’d be neat if you found a use for it, but I never anticipated you’d get everyone going on the first day.”

“Yeah, I’m sure you didn’t.”

If she had foreseen all this while recruiting me, she was either a prophet or a supervillain.

“Um... So why did you call me? Some kind of emergency?”

“Mm? Oh, sorry. Right. You got everyone so excited, it completely slipped my mind... It’s just some simple business. After I sent you to the ceremony, I did a little more finagling on my side. I’ve worked out a few more details about your status, and I wanted to share them with you ASAP... Talking while you’re outside might be a little dangerous. Why don’t we get in contact again when you’re in your dorm?”

“All right. Actually, where am I supposed to live? I planned on working that out today.”

“Oh, no need to worry about that. I already have a dorm prepared for you. The coordinates should be on your device, so just load that up on your map.”

Provost Ichinose bade me good-bye and quickly ended the call.

“Phew...”

I let out a small sigh and put a finger on the screen to do as she instructed. Before I could even open the map app, a notification appeared on the top half of the screen. It was a news bulletin from STOC, the island-exclusive social network. Normally, I never paid attention to notices like this, but this time, my eyes were instantly on it.

This is turning into a huge deal, isn't it?!

Yes. Yes, it was. The news flash on my device was a special feature covering the morning's Game and the speech I had given afterward. *THE INVINCIBLE EMPRESS SLAIN?!* read the headline up top, written in an embarrassingly large font. The article went on in the most sensational manner about Sarasa Saionji's defeat and the birth of a new Seven Star. It included a link to STOC's "Hot Words" list of the most popular keywords on the site right then. By tapping that, I saw that the trends for the past hour had been *Sarasa Saionji, Empress, Seven Star*, and *the Shinohara kid*. The general timeline was full of similar phrases, too...so I decided to turn my device off.

She really is that big a deal, huh? Her family and the rest of it's all true, I guess.

A student body wouldn't care this much about a normal rich girl. Sarasa Saionji was special. That's why this had ballooned into a monster topic. I realized I hadn't apologized to her yet. Contacting her would be difficult at the moment, but I resolved to see to that soon.

Upon turning at an intersection and moving out of sight of the crowd, I allowed myself a deep breath, a moment in time for everything to fall into place.

“...Huh?”

And that's when someone grabbed my arm and promptly yanked me into the nearest alley.

#

My back slammed against the solid wall with a dull thud. She placed her

hands against the wall on either side of me, looming before me and eclipsing my body. Her breath was ragged; a sweet citrus aroma drifted into my nose.

“Heh...heh-heh... That was a fine speech you gave.”

The girl, lips twitching as she spoke, was none other than that red-haired heiress—Sarasa Saionji, ex—Seven Star and former unbeatable Empress. If she’d sought me out for a rematch, I’d understand, but something told me that wasn’t it. Her expression was sharper than the last time I had seen her.

“...”

I instinctively kept quiet. Why was she so upset? Based on what she’d said, I figured my speech was the cause...but the lie was supposed to be convenient for the Saionji family, too. Losing to the new strongest student in school was far less of a blow to her pride than failing against some One Star idiot.

“...Oh. Trying to play innocent, huh?”

Saionji wasn’t in any mood to see the positive side. As I listened to her voice, I realized she was putting on a front. The emotion in her ruby eyes wasn’t anger, but fear.

“Look, what are you even after? You got dirt on me, and you gave that showboating speech...yet you haven’t revealed the secret to anyone. What are you doing? Trying to gather even more attention before you completely crush me? Please drop this! I’m begging you, just stop!”

What secret?

“Yes, I’m pleading merely to save my own hide. But I’ve got my reasons. I need to keep this lie going, all right? So please. Don’t say anything. I’ll do anything you want!”

“Er, what are you talking about?”

“...! You’re *still* playing dumb?! I’m being completely honest with you, all right? Stop making fun of me!”

Saionji shut her eyes tight, and her words turned wobbly, which only had me more stumped. She brought her hands close to my chest, all but clinging to me.

“You know, don’t you? You know I’m not really Sarasa Saionji!”

“...Huh?”

“Don’t ‘huh’ me! I made sure there’s no one else here, so drop the act already! Yeah, I’m not Sarasa, and you know it. My name’s Rina Akabane, and I’ve been subbing in for Sarasa for a year now. I kept winning Games last year to keep the secret from being exposed, and I was going to keep that streak going... but you defeated me this morning.”

“...”

“That’s why I’m begging you, all right? What are you planning to do with that info, huh? If the truth about Sarasa Saionji gets out, it’ll be a huge scandal... I’m sure that info’s worth a lot to you. Everybody thinks I’m a proper girl from the Saionji family, but I’m not anything like that. Heh-heh... Everyone will feel betrayed, won’t they? There’ll be a huge uproar.”

“...An uproar?”

“Yeah. But you still haven’t exposed my lie. So what are you scheming? Are you waiting for the right moment to hurt the Saionji family the most? Or...or are you planning to demand my body in exchange...?”

Saionji—or Akabane, I guess—had tears in the corners of her eyes as she timidly demanded an answer. Her voice sounded completely frantic, but she kept her face stoic, never giving any sign she might run. I guess that was how important this whole thing was to her. Unfortunately, she’d made several incorrect assumptions during this conversation.

“Look, Akabane...why do you think I know about your lie?”

“Huh? Wh-what do you mean? Because you beat me, why else?”

“...Huh?”

“More precisely, because you took my red star. You know what that is, right? A red star lets you tell a lie and get away with it. But if you lose the star, that lie is revealed to whoever took it from you. So you have to know. Why would some transfer student give a keynote speech like that otherwise?”

“...”

Oh...right. Now I get it. That’s how she interpreted things. I finally understood

her reaction. I undoubtedly seemed like an eerie, evil menace to her.

“You know, Saionji...I think you’ve got the wrong idea about all of that.”

“...What?”

“I had no idea about this lie until you told me. I don’t know what you imagined, but I honestly only arrived on this island yesterday, and I truly didn’t know how to work my device. This is the first I’ve heard about you using the red star, too.”

“Wha...? Th-that’s not possible! You became a Seven Star after beating me, and that means you had to be a Six Star beforehand. That’s not the kind of rank some new kid could earn in a day or two!”

“Yeah, you’re definitely right. But I’m not really a Seven Star.”

“What?! You’re not? But you said so at the ceremony!”

“That’s *my* lie. I used the red star. I’m actually just a One Star. In fact, I’m so low on the ladder, the only star I have is the one I took from you. I’ve got some reasons for hiding the truth, just like you.”

“Ah... Uh...”

Saionji looked at me as though I’d spoken to her in a foreign language. She stared at me with her mouth half-open. This couldn’t be easy to accept, but she must have been really sharp, because after a few seconds spent frozen, her lips began to move again.

“W-wait a minute...wait. So, what, you’re not the best on the Academy? You just beat me in a Game by coincidence? You didn’t know my secret?”

“Yep. That’s right.”

“N-no way... So I exposed myself?”

Saionji hung her head, pushing it into my chest while mumbling to herself. She’d revealed her lie to me. Both of us being liars was kind of the cause of this weird, star-crossed encounter. Regardless, she’d totally just blown it.

““ ...””

We stood pressed against each other in silence for a while. Then, after a

minute or so had passed, Saionji finally lifted her face.

“...I’m sorry. I’m gonna go back home and cool down a little. Your name’s Shinohara, right? I have some time tomorrow, so maybe we can talk things over? Sounds like we’re both dealing with complicated stuff, and I think it’s better if we sort it out. Until we do, please don’t lose to anyone...”

With that, Saionji walked off, using the sleeve of her uniform to wipe her tears away. Her long hair trailed after her as she disappeared from the alley. I, meanwhile, remained leaning against the wall, watching her until she was gone. My head was reeling from all the shocking information. Sarasa Saionji and Rina Akabane. A fake rich girl. A complex reason why she had to keep lying.

Hmm? Wait a second.

“She’s not really a rich girl, but someone posing as one...which means she’s not part of the Saionji family. Does that mean beating her wouldn’t have made the grand headmaster angry...? Ah! So I never had to be a Seven Star in the first place?!”

The realization caused me to bring a palm to my forehead. *If I only knew about this a few hours ago*, I thought. Unfortunately, it was far too late for that. I’d told the entire Academy student body to challenge me as they liked. I had practically dared them. All 150,000 students involved in the star hunt recognized me as the new top player in town. I couldn’t guess what would happen if that lie were revealed. The curtain had already risen, and it was too late to stop the show now.

“Ugh... Man.”

Cursing my shortsighted actions and how fate toyed with me, I resumed my trek to the dorm, my steps heavier than before.

Tell Me, Himeji! ①



What are star ranks?

Every high school student on the Academy is given a rank of between one and seven stars that affects their standing. My master gamed the system to become a Seven Star, but he's actually just a One Star. If he tried playing Games strictly using his own skills, he wouldn't stand a chance against a Three or Four Star student.

Basic Rank Rundown

- | | |
|-------------------|--|
| One Star | To borrow Provost Ichinose's words, a total nobody. A wimp. Allows access only to wimp-level Abilities when one is playing a Game. |
| Two Star | A little better than a One Star rank. Sixty percent of all students are One or Two Stars. |
| Three Star | A lot of these students are heavily involved in sports teams or artistic clubs. |
| Four Star | Grants you a certain reputation on the island as a capable student. Some Abilities and real-life businesses are available only to Four Stars and up. |
| Five Star | The higher end of the movers and shakers around the island. The number of Five Stars in a student body directly affects a school's ranking. |
| Six Star | Granted to the true elites. Only a small handful exist. They're still students, but they're given a huge number of privileges. |
| Seven Star | Granted to the single person with the talent to rule over all students. This rank is sought after by a large number of talented people. |
-
- | | |
|--------------------|--|
| Color Stars | At least a dozen or so of these special stars are known to exist on the Academy, including the red one my master possesses. They're said to provide bonus skills to their owners, but apparently, they have their disadvantages as well... |
|--------------------|--|

Ways Stars Are Distributed

1. Awarded by a school based on one's academic performance when joining the student body or advancing to the next school year.
2. Received as special rewards during certain large-scale events.
3. Earned after one wins a "star hunt" Game against another student.
This is the most common method.

Chapter 2

The Fake Seven Star Is Born

#

The map app installed by default on my device was a pretty neat piece of software that allowed me to find my destination despite my chronic inability to remember which way I was going.

At least, I thought it did.

“Um...”

But as I looked up at the dorm—the manor, really—located at the coordinates I had been given, I began to wonder if my device was broken. This building was exactly what it sounded like, a gigantic, Western-style mansion the likes of which I’d only seen in manga. The white exterior was as elegant as it was gaudy, exuding so much grandiosity that a simple phone picture of it would have seemed like a work of art.

“I’m living here...? You’ve got to be kidding.”

I gasped at the otherworldly sight, checking my device repeatedly to make sure. *Someplace cheaper would’ve been fine*, I thought in my lower-class way, but then it dawned on me. On the Academy, your star rank was everything. All students were guaranteed ample food, shelter, and clothing, but the quality of each depended on your rank. To masquerade as a Seven Star, I couldn’t live in some dump.

“Well, if that’s how it is, I might as well enjoy myself.”

With a resigned look on my face, I pushed the gate open and walked past a well-kept front lawn to reach the front door. There was no keyhole or intercom, so I wasn’t sure what to do initially. However, I quickly recalled a passage in the guidebook.

Ah, right.

A student's device was their ID for everything on this island. Typically, the locks were electronic instead of the analog tumbler type.

"Hmm... Like this?"

I brought my device up to the door. It unlocked after a soft beep. With some trepidation, I opened the weighty door. Beyond was what could best be described as an entrance hall, or maybe a lobby. A chandelier hung from the high ceiling, and a plush-looking carpet had been spread on the floor. Even the air seemed rarefied. Most surprising was the maid standing right in front of me.

"Huh?"

"...Ah."

I reflexively closed the door.

Were my eyes playing tricks on me? I was reasonably confident I saw a cute girl in a maid outfit amid the high-class environment. That wasn't possible, though. I had to be hallucinating. After collecting myself, I tried to enter again.

"...Okay."

I took a deep breath and gingerly opened the door for the second time. There was no maid, so I took a step inside.

Oh, wait. There she is.

"..."

She'd moved into the shadow of a large pillar on the right side of the entrance hall, but she was there. Perhaps she was trying to hide, because only her head (adorned with a white cap) was visible, poking out from behind the column. Was she wary of me?

My credentials had worked at the door, so I was reasonably certain this was my new home...but maybe they'd mistakenly double-booked this place or something.

"Ah... Hey, um..."

"I"

I tried to sound as reserved as possible as I called to the maid behind the

pillar. It was clear she jumped a little at my voice, though. Thirty seconds passed before she finally collected herself enough to answer, although she remained behind the column.



“...I’m sorry, but could I have your name?”

“Oh, sure. I’m—er, my name is Hiroto Shinohara. Do you know if this is where I’m supposed to stay? I think there might be some kind of mistake...”

“Mr. Shinohara... No, you are not mistaken. In fact, I apologize for being so rude to you. Please forgive me for hiding from the man who will be my master.”

Her voice was flat, without much emotion.

The sight of her when she stepped into view...took my breath away. She was beautiful. Her shiny silver hair was cut at around shoulder length, and her blue eyes shone like pure, polished gems. Her face was more cute than alluring, but given the coolness of her expression, she didn’t look very childlike to me. She stood a little shorter than Saionji the Empress—not enough to make her look like a kid, but between that and her ample chest, she possessed a kind of magnetism that made you want to abandon inhibition.

However, what solidified the impression she made most of all was her clothing. It wasn’t as frilly as a Halloween maid outfit, but it was definitely designed for maximum cuteness, and it matched her demeanor perfectly—that kind of adorable quality that made you want to protect her. That, combined with her polished motions and her facial expression, reminded me of a cat.

“Is something the matter, Master?”

She must have found my sudden silence puzzling, because she brushed her bangs back and raised an eyebrow. I hurriedly got back to business.

“Um, there are a few things I’d like to ask... But first, why were you hiding, ma’am? It sounds like you were aware I’d be coming.”

“No need to call me ‘ma’am,’ Master. And I was hiding because of a breakdown in communication. You see, I was told to wait for a Shinohara, but I was not told that you would be a man... *Hahhh*. That sly old fox pulled another one on me.”

“Who?”

“Pardon me. I did not mean to indulge in name-calling.”

The girl bowed as she delivered a half-hearted apology. Leaning forward only

accentuated her breasts, forcing me to avert my eyes. After straightening back up, the girl blithely raised her right hand and pointed to a room farther inside the mansion.

“I’d be a failure of a maid if I forced my master to spend all day talking in the entrance hall. I’m very sorry. Let us continue this conversation in the living room.”

From the eye-catching hallway to the lavish stairway I’d yet to climb and the vast living room larger than most apartments I’d seen, it was all too much for a plain old student to feel comfortable. That nervousness was swiftly blown aside by the kind words and pleasant tea delivered by the silver-haired maid.

“Allow me to introduce myself. My name is Shirayuki Himeji. I am affiliated with Ohga School in the Third Ward, but that evil vixen—er, Provost Natsume Ichinose of the Fourth Ward asked me to live here and support my master starting today.”

“...Pardon?”

I froze up, unable to take the teacup kindly placed before me.

“You live here...? So we’re roommates?”

“I’m not sure what kind of accommodation arrangement you are picturing, Master, but I don’t believe that is the best way to describe it. I will be living in this house instead of my own to provide you with assistance.”

“S-seriously? For real? Doesn’t that basically make us roommates?”

“In a way, I suppose... Oh, while it may disappoint you, I will be sleeping in a separate room. I am just a maid, after all. We will not be sharing a bed.”

“Yes, obviously. Anything else would be pretty problematic!”

Even without that insane option, living under the same roof as such an incomparable beauty was such a fantastical notion that I could barely accept it. Himeji the maid cocked her head to one side, as though she didn’t comprehend my trepidation.

“...? Um, it’s hardly worth so much embarrassment. Or is that a front for your disdain at the idea of living with me?”

“How could that ever be the case? If you’re cool with it, then so am I. I just thought you might not like the arrangement. I don’t mind at all.”

“Oh, well, if I may give my frank opinion, I don’t like it.”

“So you actually don’t?!”

“Correct. However, it is only because I am still not accustomed to the presence of men. My disdain is directed not at you, but at that evil vixen.”

Himeji’s voice was barely above a whisper, and her eyes were sullen. Evidently, she’d assumed her boss would be a woman, and then I’d shown up. I guess I couldn’t blame her for being out of sorts. Himeji was a victim of the provost, just as I’d been sweet-talked into becoming the greatest student on the Academy.

“Well, I can relate to you on that.”

“I am glad to hear it. I’m starting to think we will get along quite well.”

Himeji didn’t look happy about it, though, sighing a little.

By the way, for some reason, she stood during our talk. Even after serving tea, she stood bolt upright beside me (okay, maybe not quite that close) with the tray held to her chest.

“...Hey, why don’t you sit, too? We certainly have the space.”

“No, don’t worry about me. I am your maid, Master.”

“Maid or not, it’s hard for me to relax when someone’s standing next to me. Besides, if the provost put you up to this, that kinda makes us part of the same group. You don’t have to be so reverent of me.”

“...Um... If you say so, Master.”

Following a moment of consideration, Himeji nodded and sat down three seats away from me, a careful hand on the hem of her skirt. It was an awkward situation, to be sure. Maybe her aforementioned lack of experience with men played a role.

“Oh, how exactly are you supposed to support me? Given your uniform, I thought you’d just clean. However, I doubt the provost would recruit you only

for that.”

Given that I had to act like a Seven Star, I understood the need for the housing setup, but why did a maid have to live here? If it was just about keeping the place clean, she could stop by a couple of times a week to tidy. Her living here had nothing to do with the lie.

“...Ah, so you haven’t heard?” Himeji’s silver hair shifted as she lifted her head slightly. “Well...let’s see. It’s a bit of a long story. How about we have dinner first?”

“D-dinner?”

“...Oh. Um, have you eaten already...? I’m sorry. Pretend I said nothing.”

She must have misunderstood my startled response. Her expression wavered the tiniest bit. Close inspection revealed something I believed to be honest disappointment, so I hurriedly raised my hands.

“N-no, I didn’t mean it like that. With everything that’s happened, I haven’t eaten all afternoon... Wow, and now that I think about it, I’m really hungry!”

That was part truth and part me trying to be polite. I’d been too preoccupied with inventing a character for the ceremony to have lunch, and I’d only eaten some toast for breakfast. I hadn’t eaten in half a day.

Himeji smiled lightly, apparently relieved.

“...All right. Good.”

#

The idea of a girl cooking for me had me a little fidgety, but Himeji’s culinary skills were at a professional level. She must have envisioned something like a fancy Italian prix fixe meal for today. It began with a fancy ham appetizer, followed by a main dish of pasta with shrimp and crab. The roast beef topped with colorful vegetables was perfectly cooked, and the simple bowl of tomato soup served with it looked like it had taken a lot of effort.

“Did...you make this all by yourself?”

“Yes. I was working on it before you arrived. The amount of island cash in your account reserved for living expenses is rather eye-popping, Master, so I

kind of let myself cut loose.”

“Oh... Okay...”

There was no “kind of” to this at all. Regardless, eating this food while it was hot was the least I could do since she’d made all of it for me. Himeji was standing at my side again, so I convinced her to sit (as before, she took a chair at a respectable distance) and began eating. The moment I took a forkful of the pasta, my eyes burst open.

“W-wow...! What did you...? This is too good! There’s no way a mere human being came up with this!”

“Putting it that way makes me feel like I’m being mocked... There’s no need to excessively praise it, Master. You’ll be eating my cuisine for a while to come. If you heap on the exaggerated acclaim now, you won’t be able to keep it up.”

“I-it’s no exaggeration! Honestly, words can’t describe this! If my vocabulary were better, I’d spend an hour or two piling on the compliments!”

I continued eating, moved by the experience. Himeji’s creations had grabbed my stomach and wouldn’t let go. She watched me, a bit perplexed by my reaction, and politely enjoyed her soup. Out of nowhere she remarked, “How do I put this...? You’re surprisingly honest about your feelings, Master. That vixen—er, Provost Ichinose told me you’re an expert at disguising your emotions.”

“Oh? Yeah, usually I am. It’s just an act, though. I can let my guard down and get real with people.”

I smiled. Friends back on the mainland laughed at me for my honesty. They’d say, “I don’t know many people who wear their hearts on their sleeves as much as you do.” Maybe it was recoil from unconsciously controlling my expressions most of the time.

“...Let your guard down?” Himeji repeated the words quietly. “I know what you mean...but isn’t this a little fast? We only met each other a short while ago.”

“Mm... That’s true, but I don’t have many people I can count on as it is, so I can’t doubt my allies. Besides, you don’t seem bad at all.”

“I don’t...? Ah. Well, if my master is a good person, then I have nothing to complain about.” Himeji averted her eyes as she replied. Perhaps she couldn’t believe my simplemindedness.

That was a mistake... Hopefully she doesn’t resent me for this.

Nervousness took root in me, although I kept it from showing on my face. Himeji got more talkative after that, but I never understood why.

“...Okay, let’s get into the details.”

After the meal concluded, Himeji cleared the table, then guided me to another room, a home theater of sorts. There was no real decor, but a giant LCD screen hung on one wall. Himeji sat me on a sofa, then approached the screen, picking up a tablet and tapping it.

“I’m going to use this to display some relevant text and images. We could do all of this with my device as well, but that runs the risk of a hacker attack.”

“...Hacker attack?”

“Yes. There are unsanctioned apps that steal data from other devices. We need to take every precaution, Master.”

“ ... ”

It didn’t sound like she was joking. I swallowed nervously. Yeah, we definitely had to be cautious. I’d essentially volunteered to commit massive fraud. When weighed on the scales of justice, I’d definitely be judged evil. If I was exposed, it’d all be over.

The darkened screen came to life. A second later, two photos and profiles appeared. The first was my own, and the other belonged to the Empress. Sarasa Saionji, that is, not Rina Akabane.

“...Ahem.”

Himeji gave me a moment to read, then coughed to signal she was beginning.

“This morning, you conducted a Game against Miss Sarasa Saionji, the most elite student on the Academy, and won virtually by accident. Upon learning of this, Provost Ichinose picked you up before things got out of hand and created a false background for you to fool the Board of Regents. She changed the transfer

student who defeated the Empress into the most powerful person the Academy has ever seen.”

As Himeji spoke, a star slid from the red-haired girl’s profile to mine. It was hard to think of that girl as Sarasa Saionji anymore, but that was the power of her lie. The provost, Himeji, the board...everybody was convinced she was the genuine article. Playing along seemed best for now.

“Right, that’s all correct so far. But what does that have to do with you supporting me?”

“It would be best not to get ahead of ourselves, Master. You’ve only just arrived on the Academy. You need to be aware of what lies at the core of these issues.”

Himeji tapped her tablet to change what was on the screen. The next page featured a large pyramid graph.

“Stars are the visualized form of the island’s caste system. They form your absolute rating at your school. The more you have, the better you are treated. Additionally, as you gain more, your invisible authority also increases.”

“Authority?”

“Yes. As I mentioned, the special treatment the stars confer can remove some restrictions in your life...however, this authority works on a deeper level. It involves the struggle for supremacy waged between the individual schools. The Academy is home to twenty schools, one for each ward except for Ward Zero. Each of these institutions is assessed against the others in a hierarchy released every year. This ranking wields a great deal of influence. It can affect a school’s budget, social sway, the number of new students it can accept, and even the organization of its home ward.”

“Huh... And the students’ individual standings affect this?”

“Yes, exactly. There are many measurements involved: how many Games students win, the number of Five Stars there are at a particular school, their participation rate and record in assorted events... But the most important aspect will always be stars. The higher you are on the pyramid, the more value you carry. A Seven Star’s school is almost guaranteed to be at the top.”

“The mere presence of a Seven Star can decide which school reigns supreme around here. No wonder people call me the strongest,” I remarked.

“Yes, that’s right.” Himeji nodded, her argent hair bouncing a bit. Then she pointed a finger straight up, expression unchanged. “And that’s why Seven Star students are *targeted*. Incredibly often.”

“Oh. Yeah, I bet they are.”

If a Seven Star was truly so priceless, then it was no surprise every school wanted one. When a Six Star student beat a Seven Star, they become the new strongest person on the island. Even if they failed, holding your own was seen as a great performance and an attack that whittled down another school’s forces. In other words, it was always worth it to challenge a Seven Star to a Game, no matter who you were.

“...But you wager your own stars when you play a Game, don’t you?”

“Yes. So nobody goes in without a plan. However, if someone believes they have even a slight chance at victory, they’re still bound to try. That’s how great the potential return is.”

Himeji took a breath, then twirled her finger.

“Normally, someone who makes it to Seven Star status wouldn’t have a problem taking on anyone. For example, over the previous year, the Empress won 117 out of 117 Games—a perfect record. The more stars you have, the more Ability apps are added to your device for Game purposes. With the talent to employ them effectively, you can block a lot of attempts at your stars. But that assumes you have Seven Star–level *talent*. That is not something we can ascribe to you, Master.”

“Wha...? How do you know?”

“I saw your score on the admissions exam. There’s no way you’d be admitted into Eimei, or any Academy high school, with that kind of score. I can only assume that vixen wanted you very badly.”

“Geez...”

“...? Oh, I’m sorry. That was going too far. Umm... Let me phrase it this way.

This score is so atrocious that I can barely stand to look at it, but maybe it's good enough for a middle school."

"I thought you were going to put it nicer!"

Himeji had used her most tender voice to twist the dagger. I'd had no delusions about my success on that test, but did I really only barely qualify for middle school?

"*Ahem!* Um... Okay." I collected myself with a very fake cough. "I get that I don't possess much talent. But there's more to this, right? I'm not really a Seven Star, after all."

"That's right. You will be treated as the strongest on the Academy, but your true rank remains One Star. In terms of preferential treatment and authority, you can only receive the One Star benefits. You will also have various restrictions, and that includes your Abilities. You can only install base-level ones, which is a lethal blow, trust me. If there's any saving grace, it's that you took a red-colored star from the Empress."

"Oh...? Does that affect Games as well?"

"A fair amount, yes. There are several Abilities that require a Unique Star to access. As a result, a player with a single Unique Star has a slight advantage over one with a colorless lineup... However, while Uniques are powerful, you are obliged to give them up first upon losing. That's one of their more painful elements."

"Ahh... So that's why I took Saionji's red star."

"That's correct. You are the strongest; a living legend. The return for defeating someone like you is enormous. And after that inciting speech you gave, you'll be targeted more than ever..."

"...But between my lack of talent and my lack of authority, I don't have the skills to back that up."

The situation was a little complicated, but that basically summed it up. I was going to be challenged constantly, and with only one star, I couldn't access any strong Abilities. Worse yet, I'd be done for if I lost once. It was beyond arduous.

Oh, but wait. In that case...

“Is that why you’re supporting me? So I can keep winning Games...?”

“I see you’ve gotten ahead of me... Yes, that’s correct. I know that acting and performance are your strong suits, Master, but unfortunately, you need more than that to survive in a Game. Thus, we’ve concluded that, no matter what, you will need assistance. Take a look at this.”

She motioned for me to look at the screen. On it were several men and women, a group with differing ages and jobs listed. Himeji was in the middle, but I didn’t recognize any of the others. At the top, I saw the words *The Company Support Team*.

Himeji’s blue eyes were fixed upon me as I took this in.

“Master, for the next two years, or until your lie is exposed, we in the Company will do everything we can to aid you. This will mainly involve help with Games, but it will cover a lot of other fields as well. For example, if you’re going out with friends, it wouldn’t look good if you were denied entry to a Three-Star-and-above establishment, right? And it’d be inconvenient if you couldn’t access the ‘dark’ social media available to high-ranking students. You’ll run into a lot of situations like this on the Academy... We will help you in every respect.”

“...”

“...Um, Master? Are you all right?”

“Ah... Oh.”

I couldn’t help but think about how cool this was. Regardless, now I understood. I had this “Company,” a small team of crack agents, to back me up. I guess that was how intent the provost was on not having me lose. Being blatantly guided around wasn’t going to feel great, but we shared a common goal, so there was no reason to refuse.

However, I still had one concern.

“Himeji...how will this help work, exactly? Games are one-on-one contests, aren’t they? Wouldn’t it be bad if someone butted in?”

“Indeed. There are team-based Games as well, but under normal

circumstances, it's illegal for people to intervene in the Games of others. Hmm... This is a little hard to explain with words, so let's play this out in real life."

Himeji shut her mouth and walked toward me to whisper, "Master, take a look at your device. Yes, the Game icon in the middle. I think you already have an enormous number of requests."

"Huh? Let's see... Whoa! F-forty-two?!"

That was beyond enormous. Just a few hours after that declaration of war, I now had forty-two opponents ready to fight me! It was a little shocking, but I followed Himeji's instructions and scrolled down the list, her blue eyes staring at my screen the whole time. Then she whispered, "Stop there, please," and reached out with her right hand. Her finger pointed to a button that read *Details*, which brought up the rank and school of a challenger, the type of Game they wanted to play, and so on. Himeji smiled a little.

"Here it is... Let's make this your first Game, Master. It won't be a very flashy contest, but it'll make for a perfect tutorial for your support."

"Hmm... The Game's called 'Fifty-Fifty.' The rules... Um, you just have to guess if the card the opponent chooses is face up or face down? That's just dumb luck!"

"It appears that way, yes. Normally, there'd be no way to formulate a strategy."

"'It *appears* that way'...? That's bad, right? Don't I have to win this?"

That was what passing as a Seven Star meant. Of course, even games of chance possessed a psychological element. I could use my performance skills for stuff like that. I didn't outright despise those sorts of contests; I even figured I could go in without a safety net and get through it all right. Still, the mere chance I could lose was intolerable. Fail once, and it was game over. Knowing that made it impossible to take big risks.

Himeji dispassionately shot down my concerns.

"I am aware of that. However, I think this Game is the best one for you."

“Uh... You mean we can ensure a win? How?”

“How do you think, Master? A way to guarantee victory, despite your lack of talent or authority... Surely there’s at least one method.”

After a bit of casual condescension, Himeji locked eyes with me. Then she brought her right hand up and pressed her index finger to my lips. With that ever-so-devilish motion, she breathed, “We cheat.”

#

The next morning:

Oh man... Oh man. So many more people than I thought...

I’d accepted the Game Himeji chose for me, and now I was at the appointed location not long after sunrise. We’d agreed to meet at a bus roundabout attached to School Gate Station, the closest train station to Eimei School—basically an oval-shaped piece of asphalt surrounded by streets. I looked around, playing it cool, and swiftly spotted an audience of close to two hundred. They were mostly Eimei students like me, but a few were from elsewhere. They formed a ring around me, watching intently.

“...”

Naturally, I felt like my cheeks were going to cramp up with all the anxiety... However, this scene wasn’t completely an accident. In fact, it was more than half by design. Last night, when I agreed to the Game, Himeji had instructed me to set it to “public,” meaning that information on the Game’s location and time would be posted on the STOC social network. That, I’m sure, was where the crowd had come from.

As for what Himeji expected of me today...

“...Listen, Master, you’re looking to make an impact. Beating the Empress garnered a lot of attention, but so far, that’s little more than idle curiosity. I’m sure many people doubt your true abilities...so we’re going to be proactive and shut them up while we can.”

Basically, this is meant to prove my position. I get that, but...

I let out a deep exhalation as I mulled over the plan. The Game was one thing,

but the more people I had crowded around me, the greater the risk of my lie being exposed. I had to stay on guard until the Game was over.

“Hey, sorry if I made you wait!”

A male student waded through the throng while I mentally prepared myself. His hair was a light shade of brown, and his well-broken-in uniform indicated he wasn’t from Eimei School. He walked up to me and waved casually.

“Apologies, man. The prep time took longer than I thought. I’m Shibata—Hibiki Shibata, from Kagurazuki School in the Ninth Ward. I just made it up to Two Star. I can’t believe I’m going to play a Game against the current biggest name out there!”

“Good to meet you. You seem pretty confident, considering you’re about to take on the best.”

“Ha! Yeah, I guess so! There’s a big difference in our stats, but I’m still wagering one of my precious stars. I’m not planning on losing!”

Shibata raised his fists like a boxer. His mind-blowing boast that he’d take down a Seven Star elicited a wave of cheers from the crowd. This was precisely what I wanted. Beating someone who expected to lose wouldn’t help spread my reputation.

My lips quirked up at the corners.

“Ha... Great. All right. Go ahead and give me your best shot. Just know you’re going to pay for it.” I tried to sound as tough as possible while kicking things off.

Games on the island had a common set of rules.

First, you could only request a Game with someone who had more stars than you. That was the root of the star-hunting system. You could only challenge higher-ranked students, and a star changed hands depending on the results. A win got you a star, and a loss meant relinquishing one. It was pretty simple. But there were several rules for less common circumstances. For example, if a One Star lost a Game, they’d be penalized with a fine in island currency instead of losing a star, and players ranked Five Star or higher weren’t awarded stars if they beat someone of equal or lesser level.

Second, the person requesting the Game decided the challenge. This preserved the integrity of the star-hunting system. If the Keeper—the defender—got to pick the Game, it could bring star exchanges to a total standstill. Thus, the challenger was given this key advantage to work with. And it was for the same reason that Keepers didn't have the right to refuse a Game. To be exact, if you had a challenge waiting and went a week without playing a Game, you'd be demoted one rank, barring special circumstances.

Third and last, a player could bring up to three Abilities with them to a Game. I'd heard about Abilities a few times already. They were these apps built to give someone an advantage in Games. It was possible to have three installed on your device at once. Once a Game began, your roster of Abilities couldn't be changed.

“...”

Put all this together, and I—a Seven Star (as far as the database was concerned)—never had the right to decide on a Game's rules. I gained no stars from beating anyone despite actually being a One Star. That also meant I only possessed the weakest Abilities. What kind of unbalanced Game was this?

“...Okay! I'm all set! Now let's go over the rules one more time, okay?”

I groaned internally as Shibata, having finished preparing his Abilities, pointed a finger at me. He made an exaggerated motion out of everything he did. I was hardly one to talk, but he clearly enjoyed this action manga-style setup of the underdog taking on the strongest player.

He lifted his hand high, and as he did, his device's screen was projected for all to see.

“The Game is Fifty-Fifty! It's really simple. First, we decide at random who plays first. Whoever does will have a card shown on their device. They decide whether to play it face up or face down, and the other person must guess the orientation. One of two choices. We do this three times, and then the turn shifts to the other player, who gets three rounds, too. If one player's ahead of the other, the Game ends there. If we're tied, the Game starts over. Simple, right?”

I could hear the crowd getting more excited after Shibata finished explaining.

Most people criticized Shibata and expressed disappointment, however. I couldn't blame them. His challenging me to a coin toss after all that bravado was pretty baffling.

Still, Shibata smiled, looking totally confident.

"Yeah, I know what all of you want to say. You think this is a Game of luck, right? Well, I set this Game up so almost no Abilities will be of use. Changing probabilities won't work, neither will controlling any variables involved. It's totally down to luck."

"...Oh? So you made it this way deliberately."

"Of course I did, Mr. Academy Boss. Listen, some Two Star chump like me would never win under normal circumstances. The difference between a Two Star and a Seven Star is way too high. But luck? I have zero chance of beating you in a normal Game, but probability guarantees me a fifty percent shot. That's overwhelmingly better, man!"

"Hmm... So if you win, you'll chalk it up to luck? That's all?"

"Ha-ha! You make me sound so naive! This isn't just a one-off thing with me. I'll start a movement! Even if I lose, people will see how valid the probability-based approach is, and they'll all challenge you to Games like mine! And it won't stop with you. There's a chance of beating anyone this way! My reputation will skyrocket. Ha-ha-ha-ha-ha! That's why it's worth betting a star on this, dude!"

Damn. He's put a lot of thought into this...

This brown-haired dude was a lot cleverer than he looked. He was doubly prepared for this match. Even if he lost a star, he was positioned to reap the benefits later. It was an off-the-wall strategy, the sort only a low-ranking player would attempt.

He's a little too optimistic about this, though...

Himeji explained to me that an Ability available to Five Stars and above allowed them to peek at an opponent's device. There was a whole family of useful Abilities like that one. Typically, a Seven Star would have access to so much useful info that this Game wouldn't be much of a contest at all.

Unfortunately, I wasn't really a Seven Star. I had no unfair powers installed. As a matter of fact, I hadn't bothered choosing any that day.

This was honestly going to be a coin flip. And since I couldn't afford to lose, that was an awful disadvantage. When I'd brought that up to Himeji the night before, she had given me a devious snicker. "That's what we're here to assist with," she'd whispered in my ear.

A soft sound came through the earpiece in my right ear.

"Hello, can you hear me, Master? Put your hand on the back of your neck if so."

If a gesture would suffice for confirmation, she had to be observing from somewhere. Perhaps she was in the crowd. I brought my right hand to my neck, eyes focused straight ahead.

"All right, acknowledged. Now, on to business. I'm sorry we're late, Master. Kagaya from the Company overslept this morning, and I apologize for that."

"Mmph? It's not my fault... You know I have trouble waking up in the morning, Shirayuki. It's your fault for setting this Game up so early."

"...Still sleepy, Kagaya? Would you like a second cup of the special coffee I provided you?"

"Gehh! I don't need any more of that black torture fluid, no..."

"Then get it together for me. Back straight, please!"

"Ugh, roger..."

I remained silent during this lethargic conversation. Kagaya was a member of the Company assisting with today's operation. She'd seemed better put together than this during the previous night's meeting. Today, she could barely get words out.

It was at that point that Shibata, having gotten his fill of laughing, lowered his arm. "All right! Enough with the introductions! Let's move on to the Game already!"

As he spoke, the screen projected behind him switched over to Game mode. According to the display, Shibata would go first. In other words, he'd be placing

the cards and I'd be guessing them.

Okay, I just have to choose face up or face down. Normally, I'd be better off getting into his head and tricking him into revealing his moves...but let's see what the Company can do for me.

I'd only been informed of what I needed to know for the strategy. I twisted my neck slightly, a gesture too insignificant for most people to notice. Himeji's voice came through the earpiece again.

"Master, from this point forward, you'll use your right hand to say 'roger' and your left to say 'repeat that.' Please raise a hand to shoulder level or higher. You can use it to touch your neck, your hair, your lips—anywhere will suffice as a response."

Oh... My right hand?

"Thank you very much. We have everything in place now, so I'd like to begin the performance we discussed last night. However, this Game isn't all that complicated, so I will serve merely as your communications contact. Kagaya will handle all the actual work."

"Yep. Kagaya checkin' in. I was forced to wake up early against my will, so sorry if I sound all spaced-out, Hiroto. Wait, I mean Hiro."

She means what? Whatever. Right hand, right hand...

"Aw, sweet! Hiro accepted it!"

"...As you can see, Master, Kagaya can be something of a handful at times, so please be patient with her. Now, let me explain how this works. You actually don't have anything very difficult to do, Master. Kagaya has hacked into your opponent's device to ensure that all three of the cards he chooses will be face down, so say, 'Face down' when it's time to guess. And present yourself in a way that doesn't draw suspicion of cheating, please."

What?

The words in my ear made my brain seize up, and I was unable to raise either hand in response. For a moment, I wondered if there was static that had caused me to mishear. The sight before me quickly dispelled that notion, though.

“Ah... Wait. This is weird... Shit. Why isn't it responding to me?!”

Shibata was jabbing at his device with a finger, a look of deep concern on his face. If I had to guess, his device no longer accepted his inputs. Staring blankly at him, I rubbed at my hair a bit with my left hand.

“Was that not clear? I apologize, Master. Um... Basically, Kagaya, our electronics specialist, has broken into your opponent's device. All she's done is lock all its inputs. Your opponent's card defaults to face down each round, so face down is the only decision he can make.”

“...”

“Oh, but bear in mind that this is absolutely unfair. Third parties are barred from interfering with Games, and hacking into your opponent's device is forbidden as well. If people find out, you're finished...but we'll make sure that doesn't happen.”

Himeji's cool voice sounded pretty confident. It was cheating, and done so blatantly, too. We were using a dirty trick to let me elbow my way toward victory with no hesitation whatsoever.

Oh...right. Now I get it.

I wasn't distraught over any moral quandary. It was just hard to believe at first. Upon hearing it explained again, I realized that I truly was guaranteed to win. There was no room for luck at all. This Game's winner had been decided before it began.

There was no way it had been easy, though. Stars and Games played a vital role in daily life here. Undoubtedly, thousands of students had tried cheating their way to victory, and I was sure these Games were carefully monitored to prevent that. No matter how much advanced tech the Company employed, the whole environment was arranged to make cheating as discouragingly difficult as possible.

But if you somehow manage to pull it off...all you have to do is make sure nobody suspects you.

I was in no position to welcome an investigation. Thus, my only choice was to ensure no one ever doubted me. I had to play the role of a Seven Star so

perfectly that it left no room for doubt. After a quick breath to prepare myself, I curled up the right corner of my lips.

“...Hey, what’s the matter? Can’t make a move?”

“N-no...it’s not that. My device just broke out of nowhere!”

“Your device? Come on, how is that possible? The Game’s proceeding like normal. How could it be broken? That’s a pretty flimsy excuse.”

“E-excuse? Why would I lie?”

“I know why. You’re scared.”

I took a single threatening step toward Shibata, then twisted my expression into a grin large enough for the whole crowd to see. Cruelly, luridly, I tried to strike as much terror as possible, calmly stringing words together to create the inscrutable atmosphere the Academy’s very best would exude.

“You were terrified from the start, weren’t you? I defeated the Empress, and you can’t help but find me incredibly creepy. You don’t want to be brought to your knees in the lamest way possible in front of all these people. That’s why you kept the excitement going with that fake bluster, right? It’s obvious. You were so against meeting me that you arrived late.”

“No, you’re wrong. I’m here to drag you down...”

“Oh, really? Because I think your shaking hands and legs tell another story. It’s no wonder you can’t even work your device.”

“No...that’s not it...”

Shibata tried his hardest to refute my words while working to make his device respond. His shaking hands weren’t the real culprit, of course. It was the hacker. There was nothing he could do. Time ran out, and I had to give an answer. I knew exactly what to say.

“Face down.”

“...!!”

There was no possible way I could fail. Shibata, face white as a sheet, had to pick his second card now. However, he wasn’t moving as frantically as he had

moments before. Once again, we proceeded to the answer phase without him making any choice at all, and I declared, “Face down” to earn my second point.

“Ohh! Pretty good showing, Hiro!”

“...Yes. This is the first time I’ve seen it in person. It’s very impressive. Despite the audience, you aren’t revealing anything... I can see why that old vixen showers so much attention on you.”

I kept going, an easy smile on my face. There was no need to acknowledge the voices in my ear. After three straight rounds of guessing Shibata’s card, it was my turn to make picks, but Shibata suddenly dropped to one knee.

“Ahhhhhhhhhhhh! I can’t! Just stop! I can’t put up with any more of this! I’ll take the loss! I’ll take the loss! Just let me out!”

His voice ripped through the air. Apparently, his fear had ballooned beyond his limit. Given the situation, forfeiting was probably the smart choice.

Regardless, with Shibata admitting defeat, the noise from the crowd ratcheted up a level.

“He had a good tactic, too,” someone lamented.

“Wait, what just happened?” another onlooker asked, and a few more echoed the sentiment.

“Two in a row now, huh?” remarked an excited person.

The reactions ran the gamut, but I felt like the percentage voicing doubts about my ability had decreased significantly.

This is the impact we wanted, I guess. A pretty drastic way of doing it...but yeah, I think it worked.

After breathing an internal sigh of relief, I decided to leave before anyone tried to stop me. I pushed through the crowd, left the roundabout, and hurried to the main street to quickly duck to a vacant side path. I leaned against the wall only after checking my surroundings. Once I knew it was safe, I brought a hand to my forehead, mentally spent.

That...that was soooooo scary...!

I didn't say it out loud, but that's what my heart was screaming. Seriously, I'd thought I was going to lose my mind. I'd egged Shibata on, accusing him of cowardice with a straight face, but I was the greater coward for sure. All those eyes on me the whole time had kept my heart racing from start to finish... Even now, it refused to slow.

That was my first Game as a Seven Star—my first public appearance, in a way. In terms of personal impact, my thoughts were focused on the Company, my support team. Yeah...it really was useful. I was still willing to believe that I could have won on my own. However, there was no better way to secure a guaranteed win. This overwhelming power to cheat so hard that I could outplay an opponent and their Abilities was insane. But if I wanted to keep this lie going, Himeji and her team's assistance would be indispensable.

"I thought it was the worst possible situation for me," I muttered to myself, hand still on my forehead, "but now I can take it easy a little, at least."

Himeji contacted me again. On my device this time, not the earpiece. I checked my surroundings one more time before answering, speaking in a hushed tone.

"Hello? Himeji?"

"Yes, Master. How did that tutorial feel?"

"How did it feel? It was amazing...! It surpassed every possible expectation. Honestly, I was skeptical, but all my doubts are completely gone. Thanks a lot for helping me."

"...Good. I'm relieved to know you've accepted our support."

"Oh, absolutely. I'm sorry for dragging you into all this trouble, but I'll be relying on you a lot going forward! Keep up the good work!"

"...! I...I see. Hearing that from you, I... Ah, never mind that. Forget about it. Regardless, the opening ceremony for Eimei School's new term is today. We will provide support if something comes up, but I would advise you to report back to the school before long."

"...? Oh, right. Okay."

Himeji sounded a little tongue-tied for a second, but she recovered quickly. Was she embarrassed? I genuinely put a lot of faith in her, but maybe I shouldn't have expressed it so casually.

Better be careful with that... People laugh because I'm too honest.

I shook my head as I chided myself, sighed, and launched my map app.

Chapter 3

Sharing the Front Lines

#

“...Ughh.”

Shortly after securing a dominant victory in my early-morning Game, I followed my device’s directions to get to Eimei School. Upon arriving, I discovered something that made me wince. A group of people wearing non-Eimei uniforms was gathered before the gate. There were seven of them, all girls, and each was beautiful enough to stop other students in their tracks.

The red-haired girl in the middle with her arms crossed was all too familiar to me.

“...So you’re finally here.”

Rina Akabane, aka Sarasa Saionji—the Empress and ex–Seven Star who, around half a day before, had revealed an earth-shattering lie to me after a chance encounter and a handful of misunderstandings.

Saionji (I’ll just call her that going forward to keep it clear) raised a hand to keep her entourage at bay as she stomped her way over to me, obviously trying to make her steps as loud as possible. She stopped only a few paces away, a mocking sort of smile on her face.

“Good morning, Shinohara. Sleep well last night?”

“Mmm... About the same as always. Do you need something?”

“Oh, nothing. I’m certainly not asking for an apology after I agonized over losing to you to the point that I got no rest.”

She wasn’t even trying to hide her distaste for me. Yet while her attitude was as prickly as I remembered, her manner of speaking had returned to little-rich-heiress mode. Unlike the day before, she played it cool.

I still had no idea where this was going, but I decided to play along.

“Ha... Like I care. You lost only because you’re weaker than me. Do I need to apologize for that? ‘Sorry that I have more talent than you’?”

“You...little...! Think you’re a big shot now, huh? I’m gonna make you regret those words.”

“Oh, really? Well, it’s the right of weak people everywhere to whine about stuff they can never accomplish, so...”

“We’ll see about that, won’t we? I always keep my word. And I don’t need some one-hit wonder like you acting like my equal.”

“What a coincidence. I don’t want to be grouped in with you, either.”

“...*Tsk!*”

Wow. This (pretend) little lady had just clicked her tongue at me. She’d started this whole argument. Geez. By the way, from what I picked up from the surrounding whispers, most onlookers were simply curious about us. The obvious assumption was that Saionji and I were enemies. For now, no one eyed us with suspicion.

The crowd’s discussion grew louder while Saionji tossed her luxuriant hair back with a practiced hand.

“*Hmph...* Well, fine. I’m only here to remind you that I’m not going to bow down to you. That’s all.”

“That’s all, huh?”

I tried to sound disappointed. But then, just as I began to relax a little, Saionji, arms still crossed, moved her ruby eyes slightly. She glanced at my uniform, as though searching for something.

“You are *such* a slob.”

She stepped closer to me. Whispers coursed through the crowd. When Saionji spoke again, she did so loud enough for everyone to hear.

“Your tie is crooked... Would you please stop denigrating the brand value of a Seven Star, please? I plan to retake the title with all due haste.”

A light smile crossed her lips as she reached out to my chest and deftly straightened my tie. A light aroma tickled my nose. Given the way we'd met, we couldn't help but clash with each other, but seeing her like this reminded me how cute she was...

"Hmm. Maybe I ought to strangle you with this right now..."

"Hey."

I take it back. Nothing about her (except her face) was cute at all. Even if she sent my heart racing, I'm sure it was out of fear, not excitement. A cardiopulmonary alert.

After fixing my tie, Saionji stepped back. "Okay," she stated jovially. "I'll see you soon. I can't wait to see if you break the record for shortest stint as a Seven Star."

Saionji was determined to goad me to the very end. Having finally said her fill, she left for the Third Ward. Her entourage followed a step behind, making sure to sneer at me in unison.

I breathed out, acting all cool now that Saionji was gone. However, when I idly glanced down, my eyes caught something out of place.

There's a paper in my breast pocket... Did she put it in there?

The double-folded note was a little dog-eared at the corners from her stuffing it in. It only took a second to understand. All that business about my tie had just been a front so she could get this to me. Saionji and I garnered a lot of attention in public, and without each other's contact information, we had no private communication method.

Later, upon checking the note, I found that it contained a set of coordinates and a...well, I suppose you'd call it an order.

Come here after school and don't let anyone tail you. Okay? And don't you dare be late!

#

"Okay! Okay, everyone, listen up! I know you're all excited about your new grade and classmates, but we have other important things to talk about, all

right? Focus on me, please!”

A loud voice carried over the soft roar of the classroom. From outside in the hallway, I heard quiet settle in. Bringing my right hand to my chest, I took a series of deep breaths.

Right after that verbal jousting with Saionji, I’d hurried into the school to attend the start-of-year ceremony. This only lasted around half an hour, and since no other classes were scheduled for the day, my only additional responsibility was to attend homeroom. I appreciated that, of course...but the moment coming up was one I absolutely had to nail.

Phew... Get it together. There are thirty or so students in this classroom—the students I’ll probably become the most involved with in my school career. That means there are pitfalls all over the place that could reveal my lie to everyone...

Given that a school’s rank was influenced by the total number of stars its student body possessed, students from the same school rarely challenged each other to Games. However, my lie could be revealed anywhere, not only during a match. I had to remain vigilant.

“...Right! That’s a lot better. Thank you. I’m very glad to be the homeroom teacher for all you excellent students in Class 2-A. I want all of you to keep up the good work and— Oh, wait! I have big news for you! Today, I have a new transfer student to introduce!”

“ ... ”

“Oh? You already knew that, huh? Well, yeaaaah, I knooooow that and all, but I’m your teacher, and it’s my job to formally introduce him, okay? So! If you’re ready, come on in!”

The bright voice reached me beyond the door. I reached out for the handle, sliding the door open without hesitation. I kept my eyes focused straight ahead as I approached the teacher’s desk. Then, with an air of authority, I turned toward my classmates.

Ugh... I saw this coming, but look at how curious they are...

My thirty classmates were looking right at me. But unlike the gazes from yesterday or this morning, nearly all of these appeared friendly. There was a

hint of respect, or perhaps envy or excitement, connected with being classmates of the lone Seven Star on the island. They'd judged me incorrectly, of course, but I accepted their kindness graciously.

"...Good morning. I think you already know me, but I'm Shinohara, and I transferred here for this school year. I've only been here two days, and I'm not used to everything yet, so I hope I can count on you all."

While reciting the words I'd prepared in advance, I turned my eyes downward—my substitute for a physical bow. It was bold of me, but I was sure a lot of people here had heard my war declaration of a speech yesterday. I kept the intensity much lower for this intro, and it seemed to be received pretty normally.

"Thank you, Shinohara," the teacher, a young woman, said while smiling from her podium. Her chestnut hair, cut short into a bob, had a fluffy wave applied to it, giving her a college-student kind of image. She turned toward her students, waving her pointer finger around.

"That's right. Our new transfer student is Hiroto Shinohara, just as you expected. Shinohara, if you run into any problems, don't be afraid to rely on us, all right? And...and... Ah, right! And don't let his presence distract you all, okay? I want this to be an inspiration for both him and us as we bring Class 2-A to even greater heights! 'Team' on three. One, two, three..."

""Team!""

The teacher thrust her right hand high at the call-and-response. Not all the students played along, but a fair amount of them did, and I don't think it was merely because of the moment's excitement.

This was *the* second-year Class 2-A. Eimei School organized its classes by star count, and this one had the most talented students in our grade. According to Himeji's research, the average star count for this class was 2.97. Given that nearly 60 percent of all students on the island were One or Two Stars, a mean that high was astonishing.

Which means that...well, normally, they'd all outrank me.

However, some of my peers eyed me with clear respect. Others gave off a mix

of curiosity and competitiveness.

“...”

I braced myself for the year ahead. I had to avoid the worst case at all costs. Letting the lie fall apart and exposing myself to ridicule wasn't an option.

The Academy differed from elsewhere in many ways, but this opening homeroom session proceeded as it would anywhere in Japan. We reviewed some relevant topics, received our class schedules, and spent some time introducing ourselves to one another. Once all that was taken care of, things got a bit different, though.

There was discussion about showing me, the new transfer, around the school. That much was typical, yet for some reason, the other students elected to hold a tournament, a series of pseudo-Games, to decide who'd get the honor. The entire rest of the class participated, including our teacher. Honestly, the scene was kind of off-putting (although I played it super cool, saying, “Let's see who's worthy of me”). An hour later, the tournament finally concluded.

“...Okay! Let me introduce myself again. My name's Fuuka Tatara! I'm the president of Class 2-A, so feel free to just call me 'President' if you— Oh! Ohhh!! Wait, we haven't picked a president for this school year yet! Okay, um... Future president, then, okay? If all goes well!”

“Ahh, it's not like our class changed all that much. Besides, Tatara, you're about the only person who wants to take on such an annoying job... But whatever. I'm Tsuji—Yuuki Tsuji. If you could stick to my last name, I'd appreciate it. With my first name alone, people mistake me for a girl sometimes...”

“Sure, I'll keep that in mind.”

I took pains to memorize all this as these two classmates walked ahead of me in the hallway. Himeji had reminded me that I could look up the stats of anyone ranked lower than I. I'd have to study up on the other students or they'd question why a Seven Star didn't know the basics about them.

Fuuka Tatara seemed like a cheerful enough sort of girl. She was energetic, bright, friendly, and cute. Smiles suited her perfectly. She didn't seem shy about

being expressive, because her ponytail regularly leaped up whenever she had a big reaction. Then there was Yuuki Tsuji, a handsome, androgynous young man. As I'm sure he knew, his face was so beautiful that he could easily be mistaken for female without his male uniform. He was also a little shorter than Tatara. I bet he was a hit with the older girls.

"Boy, I sure am glad, though," Tatara said suddenly, happily clasping her hands behind her back. "Being president and all, I looked forward to teaching you all kinds of stuff since this morning, but everyone in class tried to horn in on my territory. I was shocked."

"I wouldn't call it horning in, really. He's the guy who defeated Sarasa Saionji on his first day here. People assumed the Empress would stay unbeaten until graduation. It makes sense everyone's interested in him."

"...? You think? Well, maybe... I—I didn't do anything bad, did I?"

"Why are you getting all down about it now? It's fine. You beat everyone. We've got a duty to live up to Shinohara's expectations."

"...Yeah, that's true. Okay! In that case, Shinohara, if you have any questions, we're ready to answer them all!"

Tatara looked supremely confident as she crossed her arms around her well-developed breasts. That led my eyes down to her chest, and I hurriedly pulled them back up before I nodded.

"Okay. Um... Is it all right to get a rundown of the core basics here?"

"The core basics? Hmm... I know! Shinohara, when the galaxy was first created, it was really, *really* small...but then, out of nowhere, it exploded in size! That's what people call the big bang, and—"

"Stop. Stop, Tatara. If you start at the creation of space, we won't get home for days. What exactly do you want to know, Shinohara? Things about the school overall? Beyond where stuff is?"

"Yeah, that'd be helpful," I replied.

Tsuji looked up, as though to recall something. "Hmm... Well, let's start at the beginning. Eimei Private School is in the Fourth Ward of the Academy. It covers

all grades from elementary to university age, and its total student body numbers around twenty thousand. Almost nine thousand of those are in high school. People say Eimei's a pretty elite institution, and it's remained in the top five of the rankings for the past few years. Even setting aside personal bias, it's a prestigious place."

"Wow... So is there anything unique about this school?"

"Well, I think the biggest thing is the provost's drive to make Games within the school a regular, recommended thing. They're all simulated Games, of course, nothing you make a formal request for on your device. Here at Eimei, we use Games to decide even the little stuff. It lets us test our Abilities and brush up on Game rules... You know, kind of constantly training."

"Right, right! Exactly! And when lunch rolls around, you should see the scene around the school cafeteria. You have to win a Game just to get in line. And if you want to score our world-famous *yakisoba* bread, you gotta win a multiplayer Game the lunch ladies themselves invented!"

"...Whoa."

I tensed up a bit as I pretended to listen calmly. I'd risk going hungry if I didn't pack a lunch starting tomorrow.

Anyway, Tatara and Tsuji continued to outline things as we did a lap around the school grounds. They showed me pretty much everything we could think of: the first-through-third-year classrooms, the library and nurse's office, the gym and schoolyard, and so on. By the time we were wrapping up, the topic of discussion had shifted over to me.

"...Hey, that Game yesterday was pretty amazing, huh?"

Tatara held her hands tightly against each other, pushing her face up close to mine in sheer excitement as she walked alongside me.

"I wasn't there, so I only saw what was posted online, but...ohhh, it looked like a huge deal! Beating the Empress after five hours of intense combat, then making her get on her hands and knees and beg for forgiveness!"

Huh? What's she talking about? What kind of monster would do that to...? Wait, does she mean me?!

“Yeah, I heard about it, too. You had another Game before school today, right? I heard about you using Invisible Arms to restrain the challenger from the Ninth Ward, practically pushing him up in the air... Scary!”

I agree! It's scary how much the truth has been exaggerated!

They both gave me looks infused with equal parts fear and respect as I lamented internally. Well...if that's what a Seven Star was in their minds, it's not like I could readily deny anything. I opted for a vague response.

“Yeah, um, I guess...that happened. Oh, but where did you get all that news from? Not just word of mouth, right? On the island's social network?”

“No, not exactly. I use STOC, too, but there's an even better app for that!”

Tatara took out her device, unlocked it with a practiced motion, and tapped an icon with a little “LNN” logo on it.

“This is LNN—Librarian News Network. It's the app for the official Academy news organization. It's not updated on any set schedule, but it covers almost everything important on the island. They have articles on a lot of neat stuff, so it's really popular.”

“Wow, I didn't know that existed.”

Impressed, I looked at Tatara's screen. It displayed a list of articles organized by date. The newest article went like this:

SHOCK! Empress DEMOLISHED in First Battle of the School Year by a Seven Star Transfer Student?!

Early in the morning of April 6, a climactic battle took place in the Academy's Third Ward, rocking the history of the island. Ohga School's Empress, Sarasa Saionji, had her winning streak brought to an end at the hands of a king for the next generation.

...It's fair to say that nobody lucky enough to witness the event could fully comprehend exactly how the match unfolded. Such were the nimble, faster-than-light moves of Hiroto Shinohara as he cornered the Empress before snatching his victory. This reporter could hardly believe his own eyes at first. However, the tears that shone in the eyes of Sarasa Saionji as she crumpled to

the ground told the entire story behind her defeat.

...But he hasn't been resting on his laurels, defeating another student in a Game held early this morning. "I was so scared, it was like all my senses went numb," the challenger (who asked not to be named) told LNN in an exclusive interview. "I literally couldn't move; that's how afraid I was. I couldn't tell if I had my hand on my device or not."

LNN is still receiving conflicting reports on this new transfer student. Some rumors indicate he's the son of a family as illustrious as the Saionjis, while others claim he's a spy sent by a foreign nation or a rogue who made his name in the "underground Games" of urban legend. Despite all this conjecture, much remains unknown about Shinohara. We will continue to investigate and report on this new, earth-shattering figure in the Academy scene.

"..."

I froze for a bit, staring at this beyond-sensational news article. Then I sighed and cursed myself.

This—this is insaaaaaaaane!

What the hell? Who was this article supposed to be describing?! There was so much exaggeration and dramatization to this piece that it didn't even make sense. If people thought this told them everything they needed to know, it was no wonder Tatara and the others beheld me with so much awe.

However, when I thought about it...none of this was necessarily bad for me. It was a tailwind, if anything. All this aggrandizing would bring me even more attention, but it would do wonders for establishing me as the strongest on the island. So it was probably best to accept it.

I just sighed and shook my head slowly, hiding the swirl of complex emotions raging inside.

#

"You'd like to go offline for a little while?"

After school and the freewheeling tour Tsuji and Tatara gave me, I reached out to Himeji as I made my way to the Third Ward.

“Yeah. You’re still picking up all my audio, aren’t you?”

“That is correct, Master. I keep the connection live in case something happens to you. In fact, I’m by your side right now. I’m currently looking at your back.”

“Oh, okay, then that, too. Would you mind leaving me alone for a bit?”

“...”

Himeji fell silent. Honestly, it was beyond painful for me. She devoted so much of herself to this, and I ordered her to leave me alone. I didn’t want to, but I couldn’t have Himeji join the conversation I was about to take part in.

“Er...I’m really sorry! I can’t explain why in detail, but I promise I won’t do anything weird!”

“...All right. I suppose there’s nothing to do but accept.”

“Y-you’ll do it?!”

“I will. I am a perceptive maid, after all. But...well, as far as I am aware, you will not find any prostitutes in the Fourth Ward. For services along those lines, I would recommend the Fifth Ward, but if you’re simply looking for a cheap hotel, there should be some nearby—”

“That’s not what this is! Seriously. I’m not just denying it. This is nothing like that. Stop bullying me.”

“All right, then...”

“Sorry,” I said again, instinctively sensing Himeji pouting on the other end of the line. The word was greeted with a few silent breaths.

“Very well. I will do it for real this time. But please be careful, all right? You are detaching yourself from all available support.”

“Yes, of course. And you be careful on the way back, Himeji.”

A pause, perhaps indicative of surprise.

“Oh? Ah...right. Umm...thank you.”

Himeji hung up. I could only assume she stopped tailing me and listening in over the earpiece. I lacked any way to confirm that, but there was no reason to doubt Himeji.

After gathering myself, I launched the map on my device.

Finding the place Saionji had indicated in her note was difficult. The coordinates placed it close to the border between the Third and Fourth Wards, a remote part of the Academy with scarce public transit and even less foot traffic. The precise destination wasn't even on a main road. I had to navigate back alleys, find a used bookstore in one of them, enter, and then descend a staircase hidden behind a bookshelf to reach the entrance. It was insane.

As I worked my way down the steps, I quickly began to regret ever accepting the invitation.

Crap... This might have been a mistake. I'm in enemy territory and was told to come with no eyes on me... It's got to be a trap. All her friends are going to be there in the basement, aren't they? Oh man, what am I going to do? Maybe I should send an SOS to Himeji... Or would running be better? But what if the guy behind the counter upstairs is in on this?

Useless thoughts turned around in my mind. Despite my reluctance, I wound up at the bottom of the stairs. A heavy, imposing door stood in the otherwise empty room. This had to be Saionji's hideout.

Th-this is so creepy... But I've made it this far. I gotta go on.

I steeled my resolve and gingerly reached for the door. It opened with a loud click. Surprisingly, there was no grinning mob with lead pipes in their hands waiting to meet me.

"...Huh?"

It was a café. A pretty fancy-looking one. I hadn't expected this at all.

Had the idea been to create a secret hideout café or something? The area was lit dimly, yet an array of colorful scented candles dotted the room, giving it a slightly sweet aroma that made all the nerves in my body relax. It was a really unique atmosphere that made me feel like I'd wandered into another world.

A young girl in a uniform, a server, appeared from the darkness.

"Hello! ☆ Are you by yourself today?"

"Um, no... I'm with someone, but I think she's already here. Maybe."

“Oh, I see! ☆ In that case, follow me, please!”

The server’s airy voice guided me deeper in. I never gave my name, but perhaps there was no need. It looked like there was only one other customer here anyway.

The server brought me to a table for two at the far end of the café. With a practiced bow, she said, “Enjoy! ☆” and left. My attention shifted from her to the girl sighing across from me.

“You’re late, you idiot.”

Sarasa Saionji sipped an iced coffee, looking very pouty.

For a while, we didn’t say anything. I faced her silently and peered down at my cup (I got some lemon tea). When I looked up, I saw Saionji using a finger to play with her straw.

“This place... There are no rank restrictions at the door, but it’s pretty much a secret hideout that nobody knows about... People won’t find us here, and the girl up front will tell us if someone shows up. Plus, devices don’t get service in here.”

“Yeah. I can see how that’s useful.”

“Right? It’s the perfect place for a secret meeting... *Ahem!*”

Saionji coughed, evidently preparing to say something. Or maybe she expected me to say something. I was confused, but decided to remain quiet. After our two encounters the day before and the verbal sparring that morning, our relationship was awkward at best. I’m sure she felt the same, hence why we were sitting here, silently probing each other.

We sat there for five minutes, occasionally stealing glances before looking away. Saionji wound up being the first to give in.

“*Nngh...* All right, why are you giving me the silent treatment, Shinohara?! I set up this whole thing for us! You should have the courtesy to go first!”

“H-huh? ‘Go first’ how? You’re the one who wanted to talk!”

“Why are you phrasing it like that? How dare you say that after leaving a girl to wait for so long!”

“‘So long’? Were you here for a while before I arrived? Er, sorry about—”

“Yes. You *should* apologize, all right? Making me wait seven and a half minutes is a serious crime!”

“Uh...that’s barely a blip. All you said was ‘after school.’ I think this kinda falls in the range of that still!”

“It obviously doesn’t! Besides, it’s your fault I got here late.”

“My fault...? What’s that supposed to mean?”

“It *means* that I went through hell today, thanks to you. No matter where I went or who I saw, it was ‘Ohhh, you lost a star yesterday,’ ‘Ohhh, your first loss ever.’ *Ugh*, everyone’s just so stupid! All these people treat me like a toy!”

“Sorry about that...but I kind of went through the same thing, all right? My beating you made things tough in a lot of ways.”

“Tough? How tough? Because if you have it easier than me, I’ll be really angry.”

“I feel like trying to compete on how hard we have it is beyond a waste of time, but in terms of intensity, it’s making a serious mess out of my life.”

“Oh, sure, play it up... Although maybe it’s not an exaggeration. We’re talking about the Saionjis, after all... Sorry about that, I guess.”

“...I was kind of hoping you’d pretend it wasn’t that bad!”

After leaning in to argue, I slumped back in my chair.

I took a sip of my lemon tea to calm down. Saionji (who had nearly been off her chair a moment earlier, too) was seated, drinking her iced coffee with one hand and resting her head against the palm of the other, staring at me. It was no way for a proper young rich girl to act, but I guess she wasn’t in that mode right now. Her present drive to portray Sarasa Saionji was zip.

“*Hahhh*... Well, whatever.” She set her glass to the side with a sigh. “Let’s get down to business. You know, Shinohara, we promised that we’d talk to each other. How about you start by telling me what your deal is?”

“Huh? Fine... I honestly told you everything yesterday, though.”

“It’s fine. You can go over it again. I was far too worked up yesterday—my mind was a blank halfway through. So I’d appreciate it if you review it all.”

I nodded and recounted the events that had led me here: beating Saionji in a Game after a set of coincidences, using my red star to fake my rank to avoid expulsion, and playing the role of the Academy’s new Seven Star. Saionji listened silently, and when I was finished, she stared at the table without a word. Then she let out a deep sigh and gently shook her head.

“Boy...this sucks. Last night, I convinced myself this was all a dream, but I guess that was wrong.”

“No. It’s more like a nightmare for you... I was involuntarily dragged into this, just like you. I want to make sure that’s clear.”

“Yeah, yeah. I’m not so mean that I’d doubt you after that story. That Game was an unfortunate accident for both of us, I think it’s fair to say. Right?”

“...Right.”

Saionji still looked miffed, but at least she’d accepted my side of the story. Her eyebrows drooped as she said, “Shinohara...why did you choose this option? If you apologized, you might’ve gotten off with an expulsion from the island. Pretending to be a Seven Star until you graduate... Frankly, it sounds ridiculous.”

“Umm... Well, yeah, but...”

Not that Saionji knew, but I wasn’t sure it would have stopped with my being kicked off the island. If the provost’s remarks were true, there had been no chance of my returning to a normal life regardless of the route I took. That wasn’t important, though. I had a reason for staying here.

“Hey, don’t tell this to anyone, okay, Saionji? To tell the truth...there’s someone I’m looking for. On this island.”

“Oh? You’re here to find this person?”

“Yeah. She’s an old childhood friend of mine, and we haven’t seen each other in years, but I’m certain I’ll find her here. That’s why I came to this island. I applied to a few of the high schools here, but I didn’t get into any. I managed to

get picked up as a second-year, though, and I'm not returning to the mainland until I find her. That's all, really. It's nothing particularly incredible."

"...If you really believed it wasn't a big deal, you wouldn't take on all this trouble."

"True..."

Saionji turned those eyes on me again. She had a point. My childhood friend and I had been separated at a young age. Although I wanted to see her again, I only had a vague recollection of her name and appearance, but her presence was etched into my memory. So much so that I had been willing to tell a lie that risked making me an enemy of the entire Academy. I was prepared to cheat as much as I needed to.

"Unfortunately...I'm in no position to look for somebody right now, so..."

"I'm sure you're not. You'll be conspicuous no matter what you do for a while to come. You're probably better off laying low for now. Since you were nice enough to tell me all that, let me clue you in on something in return. If you ever manage to become a real Seven Star, that'll give you access to every single piece of data on the island. That includes the student database. Hee-hee... Then your search will be over instantly, won't it?"

"A real one? Come on..."

I sighed, exasperated. I'd already tricked the system into thinking I was a Seven Star. No matter how much I won, I'd never gain any more stars. It was a total pie-in-the-sky theoretical. I'd keep it in mind just in case, though...

"Based on what you said yesterday, you're actually Rina Akabane, not Sarasa Saionji, right? What's that even mean?"

"What's it mean? It's pretty obvious, isn't it? I'm Rina Akabane, but in public, I'm Sarasa Saionji. I call myself Sarasa and pass as her around school, too."

"Yeah, but why? And more importantly, how? Even if you used the red star to rewrite your data, replacing somebody can't be easy."

"Normally, no. But Sarasa's a unique case. For generations, the Saionji family has kept its children away from the wider world. I don't know if they want to

keep them sheltered or whatever, but that's the rule in that family."

"It is?"

"Yup. And Sarasa's no exception. She's barely left the family premises...and only other Saionji family members know what she looks like. I'm talking a tiny handful of people. Her family, their closest servants, and the friend pool she's been permitted."

"Her 'friend pool'? What's that?"

The term was unfamiliar to me. Maybe it was something standard among the upper class.

"Mmm, I'm not exactly clear on it, either...but it'd be weird if they raised her with *zero* idea of how kids her age think and feel about stuff."

"Oh... Yeah, I get what you mean."

"You do? Great. So yeah, the Saionjis were looking for friends the same age as Sarasa, and I got selected. I was super exceptional, even back then. *Hmph.*"

She held her (not-too-ample) chest out as she boasted.

She went on to explain that she had been admitted to the Academy as an academic prodigy. With her brains, she'd already graduated from a normal high school during her elementary years. So instead of taking regular classes, she'd participated in a skills development program run online by a university in Ward Zero. She'd graduated valedictorian, too, claiming the maximum possible score at the age of ten and causing all her crestfallen peers in the program to delete their accounts. It had since become a legendary piece of Academy lore.

"Wow, that's crazy..."

"Heh-heh! Isn't it? You think so, too, right? I guess you have some awareness after all, Shinohara. You're free to praise me more if you want. Don't be shy."

"No, it's great, but the way you act so smug about it annoys me."

"Oh... W-well, can you blame me? Typically, when people praise me, they're talking about Sarasa. I'm hardly ever recognized for my own achievements anymore. Plus, I've been trained to be humble about it. 'Oh, it's nothing special,' or 'I'm just glad my effort paid off.' All delivered with my trademark

angelic smile, of course.”

“...Huh. I think I see why that would upset you.”

I was new at this. It was only my second day as a lying fraud. Yet between my persona during Games and how I acted around classmates, I had started feeling something like Saionji described. She seemed a lot more relatable than before, even sitting across from me pouting like she was. I shook my head before I got too off course.

“You said you were friends with the real Miss Sarasa Saionji, but how’d all this happen?”

“It’s simple. Nobody knows what Sarasa looks like. So anyone could claim to be her as long as the Saionji family plays along. I never went to a normal school before this, so hardly anyone knows Rina Akabane, either.”

“...Oh. Then I guess the next question is why? The Saionji family is on board with your lie, right? Why would they do all this?”

“Mm... Um, ah... Well...”

“...?”

It seemed like a perfectly valid inquiry, yet Saionji appeared oddly reluctant to answer. She stared down at her fingers, eyebrows bunched up as she worked out what to say. A few seconds later, her ruby eyes returned to me. Her reply almost knocked me out of my seat.

“The thing is...Sarasa’s been *kidnapped*.”

Her explanation, given in the gloomiest of tones, went like this:

The real Sarasa Saionji was missing. It had happened a little over a year before. The young lady had simply vanished. Upon realizing this, the servants banded together to look for her, yet there was no sign of the girl. According to the Saionji family’s investigators, she was most likely the victim of a kidnapping plot, but no criminal or group ever claimed responsibility or sent a ransom note, so the case quickly reached a dead end.

A few days after Sarasa Saionji disappeared—the day before the previous year’s new-student entrance ceremony—Rina Akabane made the following

proposal to the head of the Saionji family (who was also the island's grand headmaster).

"What do you think about me substituting for Sarasa?"

"She'd never leave without saying anything to me. In all probability, we're dealing with a kidnapping...but if the kidnappers take no action, there's nothing we can do. So why don't we take action to unnerve them?"

"I will attend school as Sarasa. The Saionji family will keep its daughter's disappearance a secret, and they'll secure consensus for the deception across the Academy. No matter what they're after, the kidnappers are bound to panic and make some kind of move.

"Please allow me to do this. I'm Sarasa's best friend, after all."

Rina delivered the proposal with a shaky voice, but her eyes and resolve were firm and clear. After considerable thought, Chairman Masamune Saionji accepted.

"...Unfortunately, it wound up not achieving very much. One year later, and there's still no sign of Sarasa."

That's how Saionji, voice laced with ennui, finished the story. She put on a sardonic smile and peered at me, gauging my reaction.

"Well? That's why I've been living a lie, and no one can find out. I share this deception with the Saionji family. If it's ever revealed, my name and the Saionjis' will be tarnished. Sarasa was kidnapped, and her family sat idle for over a year instead of trying to get her back... The Saionjis will be raked over the coals, I'm sure. Plus, we can't forget that the Japanese government gives the Academy special self-rule status because the Saionjis wield enough power to make that work. If the family loses respect, it could endanger the entire island."

"..."

"...Shinohara? Why aren't you saying anything?" Saionji leaned in, sounding a little unnerved.

She watched me with obvious annoyance. I'm sure that after having revealed the backstory this whole meeting was meant to discuss, she expected me to act

more surprised or sympathetic.

At the very least, I understood her motivation. It was more of a crisis than I'd thought. Now I felt awful for beating her in that Game. I truly did. However, I vocalized a completely different thought.

"...like you."

"...What? Sorry, I couldn't hear you. What did you say?"

"I said..., 'It's unlike you.'"

"Huh?!"

Saionji had definitely been expecting a different response, because my remark stunned her into silence.

"Well, hang on," I said. "I'm not trying to provoke you. I've been wondering about your situation since yesterday, and honestly, I'm pretty freaked over how much worse it is than I imagined. But..."

"But?"

"But seeing you talk like this, all serious...it's kind of weird, I guess."

"Wh-what? You don't even know me!"

She seemed on the verge of tearing up. I didn't know her well, that was true. However, given that she'd acted worse after each encounter with me, I don't think my reaction was unwarranted. Plus, her story led to more questions. Had she taken this role to lure the kidnappers out? Was any of it even true? This girl didn't seem like the sort who'd do something so selfless.

I decided to put emotion aside for a moment. If I believed her version of events, then one year earlier, the Saionjis had made this girl a substitute for their missing daughter in hopes of rescuing her. It was a wild idea, one that worked only because of the Saionji family's support and the red Unique Star. That explained why this Saionji had needed to protect her Seven Star status at all costs. If she lost a Game, after all, she'd lose that special star first. What's more, whoever took the red star from you would learn about your lie. That was its downside. Basically, Saionji had fought for a year under the constant threat of being exposed.

“So you thought I knew your lie, came after me to keep me quiet, and then wound up revealing it all.”

“*Ngh...* I—I didn’t have a choice! Your speech at the welcome event sure didn’t sound like a performance to me! But here you are, this new guy who barely knows how to work his device... If I only knew that sooner, I never would’ve done any of that crap!”

Saionji took the straw from her glass and downed the remainder of her coffee.

“...*Mmph! Koff, koff...*”

Either the bitterness or the sheer volume of the coffee gave her a short coughing fit. I reluctantly offered her my half-consumed lemon tea.

“Huh?”

Saionji peered into my eyes, perplexed for a moment. She still took the glass, though. Replacing the straw in it with her own, she took a few sips, gaze now lowered to the table. By the time the amber liquid was gone, she was all better.

“Ah, umm... Th-thank you.”

“It’s...fine.”

And right after that exchange, we found ourselves in awkward waters again. If the goal of today’s meeting was to learn more about each other, then we’d already succeeded. Saionji gave no indication of leaving, but I thought it was about time to wrap up.

I decided to linger for a bit, however. I still wanted to know what she’d meant when she said, “Please don’t lose to anyone.” Admittedly, I had some inkling, but I wanted to be sure before we parted ways.

“Saionji...I think I’ve realized something.”

“You have? What?”

“You’ve lost the red star’s protection. If someone pulled up your profile, they’d learn you’re not Sarasa Saionji... However, you’re still a Six Star. The Academy’s star management system can’t be meddled with by external sources, and the only person who can see a Six Star’s personal info...is a Seven

Star. Right now, I'm the only one. That's why your cover hasn't been blown. Am I right?"

"Not blown to anyone except you, but yeah."

"Okay, so basically, you're safe for now. Exposing you doesn't do anything for me, and I have no reason to change my mind on that. However, if I lose to someone, and my lie is revealed, what will happen to you?"

"Oh, that... About time you caught on." Saionji snorted a little. It was an odd sound that made her seem more exhausted with everything than resentful of me in particular. "Well, you're right. When you lose Seven Star status, that red star will go to someone else, and they'll learn the truth about both of us. That's how the red star's side effect—Coming Clean—works. It reveals every lie to its new owner."

"I see... Man, that's a harsh penalty."

"That applies to you, too, you know. Do you really understand the stakes here, Shinohara? Because let me tell you, the opposite is true as well."

"...The opposite?"

"Yeah. The opposite. Because if my lie gets outed, it doesn't bode well for you. If the whole island finds out I'm not really the Saionji family's daughter, then the provost of the Fourth Ward will have no reason to protect you. You need to remain a Seven Star because I'm Sarasa Saionji. Get it?"

"...?! You—you're right."

Provost Ichinose was more using and abusing me than protecting me. Either way, Saionji was correct. I only called myself a Seven Star to keep the Saionji family's eyes off me. If that was no longer on the table, the provost would lack a reason to aid me.

"Hahhh... It's just... Why?"

The resentment in Saionji's voice as she rested her head against the table matched my thoughts perfectly. Our lies were now irrevocably tied to each other. If I went down, so did Saionji, and vice versa. That wasn't the only reason for our frustrated expressions, though. No, we both knew full well how to best

solve this crisis.

“So if we put all of this together...it’s pretty obvious, right? Things can’t get much worse for us, but we’re both still barely in this. By the skin of our teeth. We’ve both skirted the lethal blow.”

“You’re right. I think the Saionji family will keep its mouth shut while you’re a Seven Star. But if either of us loses a Game, we’re done. And that’s assuming our lies aren’t uncovered some other way. But most aggravating of all, our lies are connected to each other.”

“Looks that way, yeah. I can’t have my lie exposed...and I can’t have *yours* revealed, either.”

“Yeah, same here. If you get outed, it’s gonna be really difficult to keep my cover going.”

“So I guess there’s only one answer.”

“...Yeah. I hate to admit it. Frankly, it’s revolting. I don’t want to accept it, but I have to.”

Saionji agreed as passive-aggressively as possible, her expression clouded. I agreed. I hated this, too, but the only correct method for handling it all was to cooperate. I was faking my star count, Saionji was faking her very existence, and neither of us could afford to be revealed. That made us partners in crime. We weren’t friends or teammates, but we couldn’t afford to remain enemies. It was an alliance of absolute necessity.

““ ...””

I looked at Saionji defeatedly. She appeared to share the sentiment. We watched each other for ten seconds before Saionji let out a dejected sigh.

“*Ugghh*... None of this would’ve happened if you didn’t show up.”

“I could say the same to you. I wouldn’t be in this mess if I’d never met you.”

“*Pff*. Well, we can’t turn back time. Hey, Shinohara, why don’t we exchange contact info? It’ll be better if we can get in contact with each other.”

“Yeah, good point.”

We raised our devices to each other to trade info. With that, my business for today was over. Saionji still looked peeved, so it was probably best to get out while I could.

“...Oh.”

However, right when I got out of my seat, Saionji spoke up from hers.

“Mm...? Did you say something?”



“Um, it’s no big deal... There’s just something I feel obligated to say...”

“Yeah?”

“I’m...counting on you, okay?”

Her face was turned away from mine. The elbow of one arm rested against her knee, while the hand waved listlessly. It was a cute gesture, and I watched it for a moment before chuckling.

“Yeah... Same here.”

#

By the time I left Saionji and the bookstore, the sun was already setting.

I was right on the border of the Fourth Ward, but it was a decent trek back to my dorm, so I didn’t return until seven in the evening. Himeji, who (by some amazing coincidence) just happened to be cleaning around the front door when I showed up, gave me a relieved smile that almost had me mistake her for an angel.

After dinner, still awash in the joy of the excellent meal, I kicked back and relaxed. Himeji sat on a chair diagonally across from me in her maid outfit, reading some textbook. I was preoccupied with my device.

“Hmmm...”

“...Something the matter, Master? That ‘hmmm’ sounded like a plea for attention.”

“Huh? No, I didn’t mean it like that... I’m just trying to focus.”

“Focus? On what?”

Himeji’s voice was cold even as her silver hair stirred. I gave her a nod, suddenly nervous about continuing. I found my voice before long, though.

“I’m, uh...searching for myself online.”

The time-honored tradition of looking up your own name on the internet. That, your nickname, or titles ascribed to you. Creators and artists generally searched for themselves for advertising purposes or to gauge audience response. Neither of those purposes applied to me, but if I had to pick, my

motivations were closer to the latter.

Initially, I was too nervous to look, but after a gulp, I finally got my eyes open. There were a seemingly infinite number of results beneath the search box with *Hiroto Shinohara* entered—2,471, to be exact. When I tried other keywords like *Shinohara* by itself or *transfer student*, the results quickly shot past ten thousand.

There was no way I was going to check every hit, but here are some excerpts from the text results:

Who's that transfer student?! He's working way too hard at the start of the semester! It's insane!

This Hiroto Shinohara guy is way too much of an asshole. It's not even funny. Who does he think he is?

Whoa! Did you hear? Did you hear?! Shinohara's got his second win! Wow!

Suddenly, all the idiots saying Hiroto Shinohara's a wimp have gone quiet. You all watching?

Whether he's a wimp or the best out there, he still pisses me off...

The social media app was overflowing with opinions that ranged from glowing to hateful. My reason for searching myself was to gauge thoughts on me. I wanted the raw data that intellectual knowledge alone provides, and STOC was the best means of getting it.

Unfortunately...I could hide my emotions, but that ability wasn't a superhuman mental fortitude that shielded me from everything hurtful.

"I forget his name, but I'm rooting for the new Seven Star. It's such a video game story.' That's not too bad. 'I hate how that Shinohara dude laughs like some cartoon villain. I gotta mute his name.' Okay, that one...wasn't great. 'The new transfer's got a real aura to him. I think he could conquer us all this year.' 'Hiroto Shinohara is so full of shit'?! That's so mean! He bothered to remember my name, and that's what he wrote?!"

"Ah, now I get what you're doing, Master. I understand why you'd want to get a handle on your public image. We'll see to manipulating popular opinion of you

later... Oh, there's a poll. 'Who's a better fit as a Seven Star—Hiroto Shinohara or Sarasa Saionji?'"

"Oh! What're the results?!"

"Um... Oh. I'm sorry, Master. I should have looked at them first before telling you."

"Damn it!"

Himeji softly averted her eyes and apologized while I yelled at the ceiling.

You know...not to make excuses or anything, but the Empress did spend an entire year at the top without a single loss. She was a subject of respect and admiration across the island. I was sure she'd enjoy a ton of support no matter what I did. Even on my timeline, some of the more unhinged posters wrote things like *How dare he disgrace my goddess?* and *Defeat is simply unbecoming of her* and so on. Clearly, Saionji was a popular girl, although this stalker-like posting was scary.

"Ignoring that poll for the moment, it looks like people's opinions of me are pretty evenly split, huh?"

"It would appear that way, yes... Um, you don't look too happy about it, though."

"Ahh... It's always the negative stuff that sticks in the mind. It's all so much more strongly worded."

"...Hmm. Maybe you shouldn't have looked, then."

Perhaps Himeji was trying to look out for me. Or maybe she'd grown tired of this topic. I appreciated her words either way, but still shook my head.

"Nah, I'm sure that I'll keep receiving at least this much criticism going forward. I want to get used to it as soon as I can. I can't run from it forever."

"Ah... Yes. All right, then. I didn't realize you were such a masochist, Master."

"Don't phrase it that way! I'm not actively trying to cause myself emotional distress. This is a critical source of information."

"I understand that, certainly..." Himeji gave a light, charming sigh. "All right. I

didn't realize you were so studious."

Himeji looked down at her device. Whatever she'd been studying before had been set aside. Now she was more interested in browsing the net to find dirt on me.

"...Oh," she said abruptly. "Master, there's a post I think you'll want to see here."

She presented her device to me. The screen was pretty much identical to mine, although some of the design details were different. For one, hers had an icon on the upper left that mine lacked.

"This is the app for the 'after dark' version of STOC. It's an officially sanctioned program, but you can't access it if you're a Three Star or below. Between that and the anonymity of its users, there's a lot more of a 'we're the chosen ones' atmosphere to it. It's infuriating, honestly... To be more charitable, I suppose I could say it attracts the kind of people seeking to aggressively claw their way to the top."

"Ah, I see... But you have to be at least a Four Star to download it, right? Does that mean you're...?"

"Oh, did that vixen not tell you? I am presently a Four Star."

"F-Four..."

I couldn't stop myself from repeating it. That was...pretty high. I was trying to pass as a Seven Star, so it hadn't really occurred to me until now, but being a Four Star put Himeji among the top 10 percent of Academy students. Anyway, if low-ranked students couldn't get on the dark STOC, then there was nothing I could do. I sat up a bit to inspect Himeji's screen more closely.

"Hmm..."

"Right here. The one posted about an hour ago. I'll read it for you. 'But What's-His-Name Shinohara only beat a Two Star this morning. People are freaking out about him, but that's a totally average performance. Besides, what kind of freak gets off on beating up total wimps? At best, he's a bully—at worst, he's a piece of garbage.'"

“...?! Oh...”

Himeji, eyes deadly cold, got really into bad-mouthing me. Her expression didn't change much, yet something about that made the damage far worse. I shook a little, hand clutching my heart, while Himeji bowed her head in apology.

“I'm sorry, Master. I went overboard on the acting there, so please stop looking like you want me to bully you more. If you don't, this might become my new hobby.”

“Please just stop...”

“Just kidding. But my point is that posts like these are dangerous for you. If you gain a reputation as this Seven Star who goes after nothing but small fry, it might complicate things.”

“I see... You've got a point.”

Himeji's sudden transformation from maid to S&M mistress scared me momentarily. After a sigh of relief, I reread the post. Yeah, I'd won in a grand fashion, but this morning's opponent had stood far below me. If I kept defeating low-ranked opponents, it would undoubtedly stir up criticism, and there was no guarantee it wouldn't lead to suspicion.

“For reference, what sort of ranks did Saionji play against last year?”

“The Empress? Um, in terms of what's publicly known...her average opponent was at least a Four Star.”

“Uh...Four Star?! You're kidding!”

“I know how you feel, but that's the truth. One and Two Star students never stood a chance against her. And a lot of her higher-ranked opponents challenged her just to say they could rather than because they entertained the idea of winning. That's what I think, anyway. Some rumors claimed losing to Sarasa Saionji gave you good luck, and people actually believed it.”

“Wow. Scary.”

It was almost like she was worshipped as some kind of living deity. And...well, yeah, I'm sure her cute face helped with that. Plus, when she acted like a proper

lady, her personality framed her looks perfectly. No wonder people went gaga over her.

“...*Phew*. At any rate...”

While I marveled at the legend of Saionji, Himeji returned to her chair and exhaled. She turned her head toward me, that almost transparent silver hair flowing after the gesture, and fixed me with her blue eyes.

“...It’s safe to assume that all of the Empress’s stats will look like errors to you for how absurd they are. She far surpassed every Seven Star before her... However, there’s no need to feel like you have to follow her lead, Master. Sprinkle in a Game with a Four Star or higher every now and then. That should be enough.”

“You think? But wouldn’t that look kind of disappointing?”

“Pardon?”

“You’ve seen the comments on STOC. I’m going to be compared to the Empress whether I like it or not. You say that I shouldn’t worry about it, but you know people are going to bring up stats when they talk about me. If I can’t match Saionji in quality, then I’ll make up for it with quantity instead. So, if it’s all right with you, Himeji, how about I accept another Game for tomorrow?”

“Hee-hee... Hee-hee-hee! I’m very glad to hear that, Master. I never thought you’d suggest that tactic. I think it’s a fine idea. Landing on this island and immediately scoring three wins in three days will greatly impact people. It’d definitely put you in step with the Empress. Give me one moment, please. I’ll select a Game for you right now.”

Himeji visibly relaxed as she spoke. This was unusually proactive behavior for her. I’d noticed it the night before as well, but whenever the topic turned to a Game, she got excited. Or maybe the right word was *tense*—that S&M mistress side of her, you could say. Don’t get me wrong, I appreciated her help, but...

“*Hmm hm hmmmm... ♪*”

Now she’s humming?! Like, unconsciously? Wow, this is getting a little frightening... I’ll just pretend I didn’t notice. Besides, it’s kind of cute.

First, she just sat there, calmly looking at her device. The next moment, she wriggled around in her frilly maid outfit, moving to a rhythm only she knew. It was silly, but she was having fun, and that was all that mattered.

#

After I accepted the Game Himeji found for me, we decided to save the details (including our strategy meeting) for the next day.

Later that night, my mind wandered while I was in bed.

“A lot happened today...”

My Game early in the morning, the run-in with Saionji, going to school and meeting my classmates, the little meeting in that mysterious café, the torture of reading social media posts about me, selecting a Game—tons of stuff. What stuck with me the most was my interactions with Saionji.

“I feel like she’s still hiding something...and now we’re coconspirators, huh?”

I sighed, eyes closed. It was—how to put it?—a very delicate relationship. Saionji, the girl who had dominated all last year, and I, the new strongest student on the island who had beaten her so handily. We had to be bitter rivals in public, sparks flying between us. However, in private, we needed to work together to keep each other’s lies a secret.

“Ugh... Oh, right.”

I sat back up with a sigh. It occurred to me that although Saionji and I had traded contact info, I had yet to send her a message. There was no immediate reason to, but she was going to be my ally (more or less), so there was no harm in reaching out a bit.

Hi, it’s Shinohara. Just saying hello. By the way, how free are we to talk on here?

I added a question to flesh out the message. Then, thinking that was too plain by itself, I considered sending a sticker, too. A check mark appeared by my text, indicating Saionji had read it.

“...Oh?”

I blinked, a bit surprised. A moment later, I received Saionji’s response.

About damn time! What have you been doing?! After getting my info, it's only common sense that you'd contact me right when you get home! I swear... Also, you don't need to worry about using this app. The system protects all the records, and this is just a dummy account anyway. But try to avoid using my name, all right? Just 'you' or whatever is fine.

Okay. So why are you so angry? It doesn't matter when I contact you.

It DOES matter! I spent all night fretting over when you'd finally contact me! I waited for so long!

Huh? Waiting? Why? Is there some kind of urgent business?

Wait, no! Forget about that! I take it back! Um... No, I was watching a movie, and just kind of waiting for you on the side. Way, way, way on the side.

That's still no reason to get so angry at me... Should you even be up this late anyway? You can't play the spoiled rich girl if you're late for school.

Oh, it's fine. I've been doing this for a year now. Shouldn't you be going to bed early, though? As I told you, if you get exposed, so do I.

That's what I'm worried about with you. You ratted yourself out to me with zero hesitation.

If something that unlucky happens again, I'm going to a temple to get purified. And I'll make you come along, too.

Heh, good idea. If our cover isn't blown by then. By the way, I've been meaning to ask you. I was looking at STOC earlier and saw posts calling you a goddess and stuff. Do you get that a lot?

Goddess?! Oh, Kugasaki probably posted that, right? In that case, then yeah, all the time.

Isn't that dangerous?

Dangerous? Are you asking if he's a stalker? Nah, it's nothing like that. He follows me a lot and acts annoying, but it's all about Games with him, nothing else. Are you worried about me? Ha-ha. I bet you are! I totally get why you're concerned about someone as cute as me!

Wrong. I'd just feel bad for all your rabid fans if they found out what you're

really like.

Hey! What's that supposed to mean?

I think it's pretty clear. Okay, I'm going to bed. Don't stay up too late.

Huh? All right. I'm getting sleepy, too. Sweet dreams, Shinohara.

Saionji added a sticker after her last message and then went silent. I tossed my device aside, sighed, and brought my hand to my forehead. *Phew.*

“It’s like trench warfare, a million people against two... I hope it works out.”

It was a useless thought, but it served to keep me occupied until I fell asleep.

Tell Me, Himeji! ②



What are the rules of the Game system?

The most common way for stars to change hands between students on the Academy is via Games.

Basic Game Rules

1. You can only challenge opponents ranked higher than you.

This is the most fundamental rule. The winner of a Game gains one star, and the person they defeated loses one. However, there are special exceptions: If a One Star loses, they can pay a fine in island currency instead of losing a star, and a student ranked Five Star or higher has to beat someone higher up than them to earn stars at all.

2. The challenger decides what type of Game to play.

This rule is meant to back up the star-hunting system and keep stars circulating. If the defender got to pick what to play instead of the lower-ranked challenger, it could result in star trades stagnating. For the same reason, the defender does not have the right to ignore Game requests. If someone has pending requests and goes one week without playing a Game, they are automatically demoted in rank (barring special circumstances).

3. You can bring up to three Abilities to a Game.

Students can come to a Game with up to three preinstalled Abilities, apps designed to help them win the Game. These Abilities cannot be altered or replaced during the Game.

Because of these rules, my master—a Seven Star on paper alone—cannot decide which Games to play and cannot earn stars from anyone he defeats. And because he's actually a One Star, he can only bring the lowest-level Abilities to a Game. This would put him in a fairly dire situation...if he didn't have any backup support.

Chapter 4

Rashness, Recklessness, and Uncontrolled Mayhem

#

Friday morning came all too soon.

Today's Game was scheduled for after class, so I headed right for school, only to be stopped by the exact same crowd in front of the gate again. I recognized everybody in the group—the high-ranking girls in Ohga School uniforms led by Sarasa Saionji. She stood in the middle, shining brighter than the rest.

“Ha-ha! What a coincidence, Shinohara!”

She walked right over upon spotting me, her arms crossed. The other students on the scene watched nervously while chatting with one another. I was already starting to get used to that.

“Yeah, I'm sure it is, Saionji. This is two days in a row, you know. You're obviously doing it on purpose.”

“Oh, I wouldn't be so sure. Ohga School is nearby. Taking this street isn't much of a detour... Heh-heh! So stop acting so full of yourself, okay?”

“...Yeah, sure. Anyway, I should get going...”

“W-wait a second! You really should listen. Of course, I have no business with you, but I still don't think you should be in such a hurry.”

Saionji reflexively grabbed my arm as I attempted to leave, pulling it with a notable amount of force. This unexpected move made both of us lose our balance, bringing our faces so close that we almost butted heads.

“??!? ...Er... Ahh...”

Judging by how she blushed all the way to her ears, I figured she hadn't expected this to happen. However, Saionji and I were supposed to be perfect (as far as the public was concerned). Making a mistake like that and then acting

so embarrassed about it didn't fit Saionji's image.

"...Tssh!"

I did my best to ignore Saionji's aroma, even as it threatened to dizzy me with its sweetness, and I glared at her. Saionji caught on immediately, dropping her embarrassment and laughing. That's when the verbal sparring began.

"Heh... Heh-heh... You know, Shinohara, I heard you're playing another Game today. (G-get away from me a little more. You're too close.)"

"I sure am. And? Are you scared that I'll beat your win streak from last year? (N-no, I can't. You've got me by the arm.)"

"Oh, not really. I don't care about records anyway. But if I have a chance to see you wallow in pathetic defeat, I'll gladly take it. I'll be in the audience during the Game later. You better treat that as an honor! (*Ughh...* All right. But don't touch me anywhere weird or I'll be real mad!)"

"An honor? Heh. Sure. I'm excited that a rich, intelligent *Six Star* girl will be spectating. It's practically moving me to tears. (What guy would dare try anything in public like this? He'd have to be God.)"

"...! You are truly a despicable person... All right. I'm going to bring the fanciest camera I can find. I need to make sure I capture the moment that creepy grin gets wiped off your face. (Yeah, fair point...but I'm really tired, and it's all your fault, Shinohara. Take responsibility for it!)"

"Oh yeah? Nice. You're like my personal photographer. If LNN asks to interview me, I'll send them to you for photos. (Responsibility? How?)"

"*Hmph!* Go ahead, bark at me all day while you can. Any article written about you will be forgotten by next week. (Hmm... Well, how about you try to annoy me as much as you can to help wake me up?)"

"Huh. Isn't that what's happened to you? (What? Really? *Ugh...*)"

We loudly argued at each other to keep up appearances while holding a completely different conversation at the same time, one we took part in while moving our mouths as little as possible. That much, at least, wasn't a problem. But:

Annoy her as much as I can...? She sure isn't making this easy.

I glanced at Saionji's face. She wore an excited grin, and it was obvious she looked forward to what I'd say next. One corner of her pink lips curled up, and her arms were crossed in front of her, which accentuated a certain part of her anatomy...

Hmm?

"...? What, Shinohara?"

The fact that I couldn't help but compare her to Himeji probably had a lot to do with it, but Saionji's chest seemed pretty small to me. And she had requested I try annoying her. If she nursed a complex about it, then it was a good target...

I guess I might as well try.

"Well, I'm a Seven Star, so it doesn't matter to me, but if you want to get back in the news, you better start drinking your milk every morning. Your breasts could use the help."

"_____"

The moment I voiced the words, Saionji's entire body went rigid. At least, that's how it seemed initially. Close inspection revealed that her arms were trembling. She still had a smile on her face—we were still before an audience, after all—but resentful hatred burned in her eyes.

"I—I *am* in the news. Every single day... And I actually pad these out a bit already!"

"Um... Saionji?"

"...! Never mind. It's nothing. I promise. But thanks for that lovely morning greeting, Shinohara. I think I'm going to have a great day now!"

"Great. That's good, I guess?"

"It is," Saionji replied with a snort. She turned around, waving a spiteful arm at me. She turned her attention to the audience for a moment, looking... resentful. Or perhaps the way her brow was furrowed suggested concern. She'd asked me to provoke her, but maybe I had gone too far.

What was I supposed to do?!

I was left thoroughly confused... All I'd done was follow Saionji's instructions. She'd had no right to attack me. Setting that aside, I looked where she'd glanced at for a moment before leaving.

Was she watching that guy?

My gaze stopped on a male student standing a slight distance from the audience. He wore a gaudy jet-black cloak over his uniform, which gave him a decidedly abnormal air. His grim eyes were fixed on me, as though evaluating my worth. He disappeared into the crowd after a beat, yet his unique presence and the curious way Saionji had reacted to him engrained him in my memory.

"...A guy in a cloak?"

Class 2-A was between periods, so I decided to inquire with Tatara about the boy I'd seen earlier.

"Yeah. A black cloak. I spotted him earlier today. It seems like an unusual thing to wear around town."

"Oh, right, right! Yeah, Kugasaki does stick out a lot."

"Kugasaki? So that's him, huh? Do you know him, Tatara?"

"No, not at all, but Kugasaki's notorious. Seiran Kugasaki's his full name. He's a high school third-year at Otowa School in the Eighth Ward. Just about everyone on the island knows him."

"Wow... Why's he so famous?"

"Well..."

"Because he's a Five Star. With a Unique Star, too."

Tsuji had sidled up to us when I wasn't paying attention, and he answered before Tatara could. Tatara scowled at him, but it didn't stop Tsuji from continuing.

"Kugasaki's known around the island as the best Otowa School has to offer. He doesn't stand out as much as you do, Shinohara, but even a Five Star's a one-in-a-thousand elite. He picked up a blue Unique Star a couple of months

ago. A lot of people place him equal to a Six Star now. Plus, there's a lot of stories about him. Legends, more like."

"Oh, totally! For example, I heard he's achieved perfect scores on every single test he's taken since entering Otowa. Oh, and he's supposed to be the leader of an unsanctioned city patrol group!"

"Yeah, the Self-Styled Holy Knights. It's a group Kugasaki founded during his first year of high school. It was nothing big at first, but now it's got over three hundred members. That's likely one of the biggest of the unofficial student groups. That Kugasaki practically breathes charisma."

"Yeah, he looks like a weirdo, but he's pretty popular. Oh, also, he's got a pretty funny nickname. They call him the Phoenix."

"...The Phoenix?"

I raised an eyebrow. Tsuji chuckled.

"Yeah, the Phoenix. Like I said, Kugasaki's incredibly sharp, so he's always had a fan base... However, something happened that made his popularity skyrocket. Around this time last year, Sarasa Saionji, who was brand new to the island back then, picked him as her first Game opponent. He was the first guy to lose to her, and ever since...he's been madly in love with her."

"Huh? Even though he lost?"

"Actually, it's because he lost. It was a first for him, and he got totally addicted to the feeling."

"..."

"You know how every genius has a weird habit? Well, that's his. Anyway, he's totally obsessed with the Empress. So much so that despite all of Kugasaki's achievements, rumor has it that he's not very well liked at his own school."

"Yeah, and it's probably true. Since last April, he's really only played Games against the Empress. He knows his star total goes down when he loses, too..."

"Right. If he'd just pick someone else now and then, he'd be a Six Star for sure. He's completely fixated. He doesn't know when to give up. And that's what earned him his Phoenix nickname. After hearing all that, you'd probably

think Kugasaki's a nutcase, yet he hasn't dropped in rank. Why? Because every time he loses to the Empress and goes down to Four Star status, he immediately wins in another Game to return to five. Ha-ha! I feel bad for the Empress, having a freak like him hounding her." Tsuji shrugged and laughed at the insanity.

"Yeah," I said with a smile. "That sure sounds rough." Internally, I was thinking something else entirely.

Seiran Kugasaki's that talented? ...Uh-oh.

That post he'd made, his obsession with the Empress... Seiran Kugasaki was so in love with Saionji's strength that he repeatedly challenged her to Games. That wasn't exactly wrong on its own, but I couldn't let this slide considering the relationship Saionji and I had. If she lost, I'd be done for, too.

Plus, I'm sure Saionji's a lot more vulnerable without the red star. That's on me, so I'd like to do something about it...but what?

I fell into deep, silent thought. I could leverage my current position in some way. That wasn't the kind of action I should take lightly, yet I couldn't shake the memory of Saionji's anxious look from that morning.

Hmm. Well, we're partners now. It's a hassle, but I guess I should be proactive.

I retrieved my device from my pocket and got to work setting things up.

#

I received a voice chat request from Himeji partway through my lunch break. Following her instructions through my earpiece, I left the classroom for the roof to escape the public eye. The roof was typically closed off (she'd hacked the lock on the door), so we'd be able to speak undisturbed while I was up there.

"First, Master, allow me to outline the upcoming event. The Game you'll be playing today is called 'Sturm und Drang.'"

"Right. It's a one-hundred-meter race, you said."

"That is correct. The two players start at the same time, and whoever reaches the finish line first wins. It's very simple, but there's a twist—there are no rules about how you transport yourself to the goal."

“No rules...? So I can use a car or a skateboard or whatever else I want? I’m assuming there’s more to it than that, but...”

“Very observant, Master. The record time for this Game is in the one-second range.”

“...What?! One second? That’s impossible.”

“It makes sense that you are surprised, Master. You haven’t been on this island for very long. However, I believe you’re aware that Games on the Academy are accompanied by unique add-ons called Abilities.”

“S-sure... I know that, but...”

Abilities was the catchall term for specialized apps designed to give you an edge in Games. I’d won the Game of Fifty-Fifty the day before via hacking alone, so we hadn’t discussed Abilities at all for that one, but:

“...You’re saying I can use an Ability to beat a guy who can go a hundred meters in a second or so?”

“In essence, I am, yes.” Himeji took a breath. *“Abilities can be broadly divided into three categories: attack, defense, and support. Attack Abilities can function as the core of your offensive strategy or interfere with your opponent’s moves. Defense Abilities prevent your opponent from getting in your way, and support Abilities rewrite Game-oriented data or aid your attack Abilities. Players must decide in advance which Abilities they’ll bring to a Game.”*

“Okay...and I can have up to three per Game, right?”

“Right. For example, your opponent today will likely use two attack and one support Ability to orient herself entirely for speed. That’s not guaranteed, of course, but we have no record of her using any other Ability set, so I think it’s safe to count on that.”

“You did all the analysis work for me, huh? And I guess that’s what we’re basing our tactics on.”

“Exactly, Master. It will be a choice between prioritizing blocking your opponent or improving your race time. Coming up with the most suitable mix of Abilities for the situation lies at the very core of Games. Read things incorrectly,

and it could spell your defeat.”

“...Got it,” I whispered solemnly with a nod. Although it was technically a one-hundred-meter dash, the crux of this match was correctly reading the opponent’s Abilities. We needed to know my opponent’s plan. I wasn’t allowed to lose.

I could come up with a few ideas...but I’m sure I don’t need to.

From how Himeji spoke, I assumed the Company had already devised a surefire strategy. I could weigh my choices after I heard Himeji’s ideas.

She cleared her throat adorably.

“So, regarding our tactics...”

The Fourth Ward’s Principal Athletic Field was a large space for interward events. Two thousand or so passionate spectators occupied the stadium around it. There were enough seats for five thousand, so it could hardly be called a full house, but having so many show up for a single Game was a good indication of how invested people were.

Judging by the uniforms I saw, a lot of people had come from other wards to catch this event. I stood on the field, encircled by the massive audience, facing down another student.

“Three, two, one...zero! Time’s up!!”

““““Yeahhhhhhhhhhhhh!!””””

The announcement rose into the sunny sky, answered by an incredibly enthusiastic audience. My opponent wasn’t talking, and I certainly wasn’t. I sighed a bit as I turned toward the source of the voice, a cheerful student with a hand on her headset mic.

“The moment is finally here! It’s time to dive into the main event...but before we do, I want to talk to you guys for *juuuuust* a little bit longer! Is that all right?!”

““““Yeaaaaaaaahh!!””””

“Thanks for that enthusiastic reply! Okay, in that case, it’s time for some introductions! I’m Suzuran Kazami, part of the Academy-sanctioned Libra

organization!”

““““Woooooooooooooooooo!!””””

This mysterious girl formed a sideways peace sign with her fingers as she gave her name, then she waved in all directions.

The “Libra organization” she’d mentioned was a large group governed by LNN, the news app Tatara had introduced me to. It was mainly involved in gathering news, covering all the assorted events around the island, and providing daily reports. But Libra had another purpose as well. Namely, pitching in during events like this.

Large-scale Games often required referees and support staffers, depending on the challenge. Normally, the participants would be responsible for finding aid, but Libra occasionally stepped in as well. Since its members helped staff and run an event, they had on-the-field reporting access without anyone getting in their way. And with Games like this grabbing lots of attention, the Libra reporters who worked the mics at these events could apparently become celebrities in their own right.

“Thank you! Heh-heh! You’re making me so ticklish from all the good vibes you’re giving me!”

The girl carrying on in front of me commanded the crowd’s attention expertly.

Suzuran Kazami was a Three Star from the Third Ward, just like Saionji, and thus she wore an Ohga School uniform...at least, in theory. It was so rumpled and worn that it was initially difficult to tell. Her thighs were on full display beneath a skirt cut as short as possible, and there was a band pinned to the top of her right arm that had *ACE REPORTER!* written on it. Her chestnut-brown hair came down below her shoulders and sprang out at the bottom, undoubtedly because of the cap she was wearing. Her voice and mannerisms were super contrived, but all the dynamic gimmickry worked so well that it was almost miraculous.

After warming up the audience some more, Kazami gave my opponent and me a broad smile.

“Now for the moment you’ve been waiting for! Let’s meet our two

competitors!”

Kazami walked past me and up to my opponent. A camera crew adjusted its aim, following her lead. That’s right, given the size of the arena, a full video crew had been deployed for this event. Our Game was being broadcast on the screens placed here and there in the stands, and it was apparently streaming in real time on ITube (short for “island tube”), Libra’s official app. Knowing this, I went in without my earpiece, just in case.

I’m not a fan of being cut off from Himeji... I better brace myself.

I nodded slightly while securing my resolve. Meanwhile, Kazami introduced the challenger.

“First, the Raider! A third-year student from the Eleventh Ward, here’s Haru Urasaka! She’s a Three Star whose hobbies include visual kei music bands and road-tripping, and she’s bringing that punk-rock style to the field today!”

“...Hey.”

The girl across from me hesitated a bit before answering, perhaps overwhelmed by Kazami’s sheer energy. She was dressed...well, dark. Her short black hair had red-dyed streaks, presumably a nod to her visual kei fandom. Instead of a school uniform, she was dressed in a stylish all-black outfit that would fit perfectly in a music venue.

Kazami spoke at length about Urasaka’s bio, eliciting applause from the audience. Then she turned around with crazy, dynamic flair and ran over to me.

“And over here is today’s Keeper, the guy who reached Seven Star status in record time—Hiroto Shinohara! He’s a second-year high schooler at Eimei and a new face on the island who only arrived three days ago! He’s won two Games in two days, setting the entire Academy ablaze with excitement! Will we see more magic from this almighty king today?! All right, Shinohara, tell us how you’re approaching today’s Game!”

“How I’m approaching it? Uh...”

Kazami thrust the mic dangerously close to my mouth and awaited my response. I quietly shook my head and tried to look as serious as possible.

“I don’t need an approach. I’m going to win no matter what.”

“Ohhhhhhhhhhhhh! So in his element! So much confidence! The kind of ‘my way or the highway’ arrogance that epitomizes a Seven Star! Shinohara’s not going to disappoint us today!”

Kazami kept on ranting and raving, the excitement making her cheeks red. I cast my eyes aside, acting like I didn’t care at all, although internally, I suffered from how embarrassing this was. I knew I’d regret what I’d said for the rest of my life. This lie forced me to act like a jerk in public.

At least nobody’s making fun of me for it...

“All right! Now I’d like to introduce today’s special guest!”

As if in response to my foolish thought, Kazami raised her hand. One of the doors opened to reveal a female student. She scowled upon catching sight of me, but once she was closer to the mic, she gave us an elegant bow.

“Hello, I’m Sarasa Saionji. I bet a lot of people think it’s a given that Shinohara will win. But as far as I know, there’s no such thing as a true given in this sport. It’s a hollow statement. So I’m looking forward to seeing the result of today’s match, just like everyone else... Heh-heh! Make it a good one, please.”

“““Whoooooaaaaaaaooooooooohhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!!!!!”””

The excitement was almost frightening. Saionji cut an imposing, charming figure. It was easy to understand why she was so popular. Strangely, she kept her gaze trained on me. I’m sure her speech was meant to deride me. In fact, she looked ready to laugh in my face at any moment.

That girl...!

“Okay! My classmate Sarasa Saionji will be joining me, Suzuran Kazami, in the broadcast booth today!”

Kazami, oblivious to the tension between Saionji and me, gave a signal to the crew filming us, then walked toward my opponent.

“All right, Urasaka, remind the audience what Game we’re playing!”

“Mm... Sure. I challenged Shinohara to a Sturm und Drang today.”

At that, the screens around the arena displayed the Game title, accompanied by a loud booming sound. Kazami looked at them, then turned back to Urasaka.

“Sturm und Drang! So cool! And what kind of Game is it?”

“Well...basically, it’s a short-distance race. We’ll use the track here, and me and Shinohara will stage a one-hundred-meter dash. That’s all.”

“So simple! And sometimes, simplicity is the best policy! Doesn’t that give you a physical disadvantage, though, Urasaka?”

“Not necessarily. Because, you know...in *this* one-hundred-meter race, *anything goes*.”

She smirked a bit, and a moment later, our devices and the screens around us displayed the rules for Sturm und Drang.

- Both players must travel the hundred meters between the start and finish lines.
- A referee (Suzuran Kazami of Libra) will give the starting signal. Whoever reaches the finish line first is the winner.
- However, this is no typical one-hundred-meter race. Anything goes—in other words, you can use any method you like to reach the finish.

“...”

I examined the rules one more time and nodded. Himeji and I had discussed what to do already. Nothing could faze me now.

Kazami waved a balled fist in the air. “A one-hundred-meter race where anything goes! So exciting! Way too exciting! Would you tell us why you chose this Game, Urasaka?!”

“It’s basically because I think I can win it... Heh! And Shinohara probably knows this, but I’ll say it anyway. My fastest time at this Game is under two seconds.”

“Under two seconds! It’s almost beyond comprehension! How will our one and only Seven Star respond to this challenge...?!”

Urasaka looked rather proud of her record. Kazami, the mouthpiece for the

crowd, brought the mic to me, and I played it cool.

“‘Respond’? Well...I mean, so what?”

“...! Wh-what, so you’re saying you’re faster than me?”

“I guess? Why even bother asking? You’ll find out soon enough.”

“Oh, okay. Stick to your act, I guess. I’m confident no one can beat me when it comes to speed.”

Urasaka sounded relaxed, but she replied with real fire in her eyes.

Honestly, I believed her. She had the guts to challenge a Seven Star to a Game, after all. Unfortunately for her, that didn’t count for anything.

“Well, that’s good news for me. Because I’m sure of my speed, that I’ll beat you, and everything else, too.”

I flashed my most triumphant smile, letting my ego do the talking.

I was ready to start the Game immediately, but we were afforded some prep time. The Libra crew put pin mics on Urasaka and me as they set up an impromptu commentator booth.

By the time Urasaka finished getting her mode of transport ready and donned a sensible riding jacket, I was beginning to regret all my big talk.

“Like the announcer said, my hobbies are visual kei bands and road-tripping. However, I’d like to add one more... I’m good at tuning these, not just riding them.”

She seemed pleased with herself, standing beside her motorcycle. It wasn’t just a scooter; this was a big hunk of iron that could seat three Urasakas comfortably. Presumably, she’d detailed it herself, because it was black from head to tail with flashy red lines running across it.

“L-look at this! We’ve got a snarling monster here, people!”

I kept silent, but I understood why Kazami was so worked up. I’d reviewed Urasaka’s Game history during my strategy meeting with Himeji, but she’d never used a machine as monstrous as this one. She was supposed to bring out her favorite heavily modified e-bike and combine it with some Abilities to

maximize its acceleration.

Urasaka played it supremely cool as she took in my and Kazami's reactions.

"This baby's making its debut today. I wanted a big audience to show it off."

"Its first outing! Wow! So you've never used this before?"

"Nope. I'm in my final year, and I was born in April, so I turned eighteen last week. That means I just got my full license, so I can break out the big guns now."

"...Oh? Can you really get a new license that quickly?"

"Uh... Let's not sweat the small stuff. I have it right here!"

Urasaka hurriedly retrieved her license, pointing at the photo on it. The card seemed real enough, but after I spotted that the printed date of birth in the upper right corner would make her nineteen, it dawned on me. She'd been held back a year at some point. To keep that a secret, this girl had refrained from riding her motorcycle in public for the past year. No wonder we had no record of it.

I don't think she did this to catch me off guard...but it's still an unexpected change. Will I be okay?

The strategy Himeji and I had devised wouldn't be too affected because Urasaka had chosen a different vehicle. However, what if this motorcycle turned out to be special somehow? There was no way to tell.

"...Anyway, with this bike, I can go faster than ever. Shinohara won't catch me, and neither will anyone else. Today...I'm gonna be the wind."

With that, Urasaka mounted her motorcycle. She placed her device into a small slot between the handlebars, then popped on her helmet. "Let me get this warmed up," she said before driving around the track.

To fill time, Kazami took up the mic again. "All right, we'll be going into the Game very soon! How's it looking to you, Sarasa?"

"Hmm, well, I think that bike tells the whole story. In a battle of pure speed, Urasaka has a clear advantage. We'll have to wait and see what Abilities Shinohara will use to counter, but..."

“But?”

“...We'll just have to be patient. If someone challenged me to this Game, I'd definitely install an Ability that interfered with my opponent. That would be the best bet, and I think it would make it easier to win. Still...I have a bad feeling about this Game. Clearly stating that 'anything goes' is a little suspicious to me... It's like we're being led on. Maybe that's just me, though. I've never thought too hard about this Game before.”

“Hmm, I see... So we might bear witness to a double cross of some sort? Now things are getting interesting!”

Kazami met Saionji's cold analysis with her usual bubbly excitement. I couldn't tell how “interesting” this would get, but Saionji's commentary was perfectly sensible. The phrase *anything goes* suggested messing with the opponent. If this was Urasaka's way of baiting me into trying something, then I had to anticipate she'd respond with a counter.

Despite knowing that, I approached the starting line calmly and on my own two feet.

“Uh... He's walking?”

“Is—is Shinohara attempting to beat a motorcycle on foot?!”

I would compete with no vehicle whatsoever, confusing the commentators and the crowd. I offered them no reaction, instead watching Urasaka drive around and rev her engine.

According to the Company's analysis, Urasaka mainly relied on an Ability called Unlock Speed Limit. As the name suggested, it shut off all limiters, allowing her to ignore the top speeds of any car or bike so she could accelerate as much as she wanted. It was a real gray-zone Ability, one that could be treated as a rule infraction if used wrong, but it was a proven performer.

As for Urasaka's other two Abilities, her default selections in past Games had been Acceleration and Safety Device. Together with Unlock Speed Limit, they formed a classic attack/attack/support trio. The kind Himeji had talked about.

If she goes with that group this time, too, she won't have a defense Ability, keeping her from responding to anything I try.

While I thought about that, Urasaka returned, having finished her warm-up. She stopped the bike beside me, removed her helmet, and gave me a deliberate sneer.

“Hey. What was that you mentioned about having a bad feeling about this?”

“Saionji said that, not me...although I agree with her.”

“Oh? You’re more perceptive than I thought. You should be worried.”

Urasaka looked down at me from her seat, smiling even harder.

“My Abilities are locked in now, so I’ll go ahead and reveal them to you. I’m using Cancel Interference as a protective measure against you, Shinohara. That’s a defense Ability that cancels any attempt my opponent might make to throw me off. I’ve never used it before, and it’s not all that well known. I figured you wouldn’t expect it from me.”

“...”

“If you researched my past Games, you know my typical choices are all about speed. However, with the ‘anything goes’ rule in place, you’ll definitely try to obstruct me. So if my plan works out, your Ability slots should be full of attack skills meant to stop me, and now they’re pointless.”

““““Whooooooooooooooooooooa!!!””””

The audience, undoubtedly waiting for a big upset, roared with surprise. Urasaka had made good choices. I only had three slots, so picking Abilities meant to counter my opponent’s behavior was always risky. Urasaka didn’t bring it up, but that was the whole reason Cancel Interference was one of the best counter Abilities. However, picking it meant dropping something else, which came with its own risks. It wasn’t worth thinking about the risk when the potential return was victory over a Seven Star, though.

“Shinohara...”

Saionji frowned a little in the broadcast booth. Her ruby eyes stole glances at me, looking anxious. I understood why, of course.

Just sit tight and watch, okay, Saionji?

I faced Urasaka with a smile, and when I spoke, I tried to sound as mocking as

possible.

“Those are your choices, huh? Okay. Are we done talking yet? Let’s get this started already. I’ve been waiting so long that I’m getting tired.”

“You... *Tch!*”

Urasaka fell silent for a bit before clicking her tongue and shoving her helmet back on. Kazami, close by, picked up her mic again.

“All right, it looks like our competitors have wrapped up their preparations, so it’s time to get this Game underway. Are both of you ready?”

“Yep.”

“Mm... Sure.”

“Roger that! All right, we’re all set, everyone! Time for the main event, Sturm und Drang! Which player will reach the finish line a hundred meters away first?! It’ll all happen in an instant—and none of you better blink!”

Kazami ratcheted up the intensity even higher, driving the crowd into a frenzy with her exaggerated affectations and gestures. And then...

“Three, two, one...and...go! Bam!!”

At almost the same moment as the signal, Urasaka’s bike let out a deafening roar as it zoomed off. Presumably, she invoked Acceleration and Unlock Speed Limit at the same time, and those two effects made her jet-black vehicle shoot to top speed in an impossibly short time. It was so intense that the sudden rush of air nearly blew me away.

“Heh... Wow, this’ll be easy!”

The mic inside Urasaka’s helmet picked that up for the world. She and her motorbike roared off, leaving me in the dust and covering the one hundred meters like a bolt of lightning. And although everyone watching was certain she’d be victorious...

“...Huh?”

I couldn’t tell you if it was Kazami, Saionji, or somebody in the crowd who spoke up first. Regardless, I’m sure everyone felt the same about this

development. After all, Urasaka's bike stopped right before the finish line. The handlebars went sideways on her, launching the girl forward. It could have been a serious crash, but fortunately, Urasaka's jacket puffed out, forming a giant airbag. What's more, the composition of the track transformed instantly, absorbing the shock of the careening motorcycle.

"You know, guys..."

After witnessing all of this unfold as I'd predicted, I decided to speak up as I began to walk, still well behind my opponent. I wasn't speaking to Urasaka, who probably wasn't in any shape to respond. The words were meant for the world at large.

"Did you think a Seven Star wouldn't see through her switch-up?"

"What—what do you mean?" Unsurprisingly, Suzuran Kazami was the one to respond. "Because I have no idea what's going on. I—I want an explanation!"

"Oh, don't worry—I'm planning to give one. Listen, as Saionji said, this Game's loose rules allow for a lot, and a player's first thought would be how they could trip up their opponent. There's definitely merit to that. But isn't knowing that already enough to work with?"

"'Enough'...? How's it enough, Shinohara?"

"What I'm getting at is that imagining things—dealing with maybes and probablies—that stuff doesn't matter. An Ability that's not well known? She's never used it before? So what? My job is to cover any potentiality. I'm a Seven Star. I'd never lose a match like this."

I strolled leisurely toward the finish line while recalling my conversation with Himeji during our strategy meeting a few hours before.

"Master, for today's match, I suggest installing three Cancel Cancellers."

"...Huh?"

"Cancel Cancellor. It's an Ability that temporarily neutralizes your opponent's defensive Abilities."

"Oh...okay. That sounds fine...but three?"

"Yes. We will fill all three of your slots with the same Ability. Ms. Urasaka is a

Three Star, so if she uses a defensive Ability, it'll be at Three Star strength. Your One Star Abilities won't be able to do anything against that."

"Okay, but I thought the key to a Game was deducing your opponent's strategy and creating a setup to deal with it. This sounds like a pretty extreme approach to—Wait... Oh."

"Have you figured it out, Master? That's right. As long as you have the Company on your side, you don't need to worry about balancing your Abilities at all. With sufficient interference, Kagaya and I can hack in a solution. Essentially, the only threat to you is Cancel Interference. There's no need to consider anything else."

Right from the start, we treated Cancel Interference as our main concern and focused on addressing that alone. Whether Urasaka was likely to use that Ability or not didn't really matter. If we shut that down, all our Company-engineered cheating would work. Thus, I placed Cancel Cancellor, level one, in all my Ability slots.

That sealed our victory, more or less...but that alone wasn't going to be quite enough. Just like last time, if I wanted to establish my lie as the truth, I needed a perfect cheating method and a performance that ensured nobody suspected a thing. The Company had set things up perfectly, and now I had to do my part. It was time to reveal my (fake) hand.

I grinned, calculating the best way to stand for excellent camera coverage. "The first Ability I took was Cancel Cancellor, level seven. That allowed Force Stop in my second slot to work without fail."

"You understood exactly what your opponent would do and devoted two Abilities to stopping her? That's actually pretty impressive. What about your final slot, Shinohara?"

"My last one? Take a look for yourself."

"Huh?"

I was finally about to reach Urasaka. That's right—maybe Saionji had picked up on it, but there *was* still one possible way we could lose this Game. What if we stopped the bike, but Urasaka just ran for the finish on foot instead? I'd be

unlikely to catch up, so we'd needed to take measures.

Like I said, however, the answer was already plain for all to see.

"If you don't understand, I can explain it to you. My third Ability was Safety Device, targeted at Urasaka. I'd feel terrible if my opponent was injured."

""""Whaa...?!""""

...That was a lie. In truth, we'd installed that heavy airbag in her jacket to pin her in place.

Regardless, I crossed the finish line with an easy smile on my face, never even breaking into a jog.

"Wow! That was just incredible, Shinohara!"

A little time had passed since my Game with Urasaka. The crowd was starting to slowly disperse when Kazami, eyes all aglow, found me and started shaking my hands violently up and down.

"It was magnificent, even! We got so much great footage, and the viewer count was through the roof... This was such a success, I'm about to have a nosebleed just *thinking* about it! I love you, Shinohara!"

"Thanks. It was a given that I'd win a Game like this one."

"S-so cool... Hey, can I use that quote in our coverage?! 'He declared that his win was guaranteed, his unflappable smile providing the perfect look for the man atop the lofty peak. Shinohara is less a pure hero in white and more a bloodstained villain from the depths...' Something like that!"

Oh, right, Libra publishes on LNN, doesn't it? Well, fine.

Saionji stood beside Kazami, arms loosely crossed. She was clearly peeved, or at least that was how she presented herself. I sensed the relief in her expression, though.

"*Hmph...* Congratulations on three in a row, Shinohara."

"You don't look very glad for me."

"Because I'm not. In fact, I'd hoped Urasaka would run you over and end it right there."

“...”

“...You could at least respond, Shinohara. It was a joke, you know.”

I scowled. “It sure didn’t sound like it, coming from you...”

By the way, Urasaka had left the athletic field long before. She’d lost, but showing off her new ride in public had seemed to satisfy her regardless. I was just about done with my post-Game responsibilities, so it was about time I returned...

“Ahhhh-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha-ha!!”

...to my dorm. However, a loud, high-pitched laugh ripped across the now-silent field. A large plume of smoke jetted from one end of the stands, and a silhouette leaped from them to land on the ground. While the smoke cleared, the figure threw his cloak back and approached. I recognized this guy; I’d seen him that morning.

This was Seiran Kugasaki, the man in the dark cloak. It was fair to call him a pretty face, at least. He wore a permanently smug expression, and his bangs suited it well. However, the most striking thing about him was definitely his attire. The collar of his black cloak was raised, and he wore a bandage covering his right wrist. When he used his left hand to push his silver-framed glasses up, I saw a symbol on it. He was the personification of what a middle schooler a generation ago would have considered a cool fantasy character.

He came to a stop right in front of me.

“Hello, Seven Star! It’s an honor to meet you. My name is Seiran Kugasaki, though I won’t ask you to remember it. I’m sure it shall be etched into your memory soon, whether you wish for it or not. It is the name of the man who will bring you to your knees, after all.”

The stagy gesticulating, that unique manner of speaking... Kugasaki brandished his long cloak around as he spoke, maintaining a thin smile on his face while delivering his antagonistic greeting.

“...Oh, really? And what’s this man want with me?”

“How nice of you to ask! There is something I wish to discuss with you.”

“Discuss...?”

“Indeed. You see, I saw the strangest post on STOC a few hours ago. It claimed that you are a more suitable rival for my goddess than I am. It was so hilarious that I nearly shattered my device’s screen right there. Alas, but I am a composed man, so I did not. Instead, I came here to watch your Game, and let me tell you, I haven’t been so impressed with a performance by anyone besides my goddess in a very long time. And that is why I wish to challenge you to a Game. Prove to me that your goddess-defeating power is no mere stroke of fortune!”

Kugasaki’s eyes briefly flicked in Saionji’s direction from behind his glasses. However, they swiftly returned to me with full force. Saionji was presumably accustomed to dealing with the full brunt of this guy’s passion, because she only let out a troubled sigh.

I, meanwhile, pretended that nothing was amiss.

I never expected he’d reach out to me so soon.

Deep down, I’d been considering this eventuality. Kugasaki had been bound to drag me into a Game eventually. After all, I had written tons of anonymous posts on STOC to provoke him before my Game against Urasaka. I hadn’t expected him to react so quickly, but I was responsible for him showing up to confront me.

My primary reason for going to such lengths was to peel him away from Saionji. I could only do that because I was the new Seven Star who had beaten her.

“*Hahhh...* Okay. So you’re here to take me on, then?”

“That’s right. More accurately, I want to prove that I’m superior.”

“If that’s meant to be a joke, I’d appreciate it if you made it more obvious for me. Hmm... I don’t mind accepting, but only under one condition.”

“...?! Whoa, Shinohara, what are you—?”

“A condition, you say?”

A horrified Saionji tried to interject, but Kugasaki ignored her and gave me an

intrigued look.

“Yeah. As it stands, I won’t get anything out of accepting your challenge. I know I’m not allowed to turn down requests, but I *can* choose the order in which I take them, and I have over fifty lined up right now. If I prioritize all of them, I can delay yours as long as I want.”

“Yes, you certainly can... How clever of you. So what is your condition?”

“If I heard you right, you want to compete to see who’s worthy of being the Empress’s rival. I say whoever loses this Game forfeits the right to challenge Saionji ever again. If you agree, I’ll gladly accept your request.”

““Wha...?!””

My sudden, outrageous demand made Kugasaki’s and Saionji’s eyes go wide, particularly the latter’s. Saionji gawked at me with her mouth half-agape. Kugasaki recovered first.

“Y-you! Are you toying with me?! My goddess is a holy, divine presence! She is not at all the kind of person to be involved in a wager!”

“Oh? Well, never mind, then. Find someone else to Game with. I gotta say, I’m surprised. You seemed pretty sure you’d beat me, so why would you think of it as a wager at all? Oh well. Running just proves you never had the resolve for this to begin with.”

“...!”

As I heaped on the needling, I could see Kugasaki’s lips twitch. Anger and irritation spread across his face. A few seconds later, he shut his eyes hard and thrust his right hand toward me.

“Running? Me? Never. As a Five Star leader of the Self-Styled Holy Knights, I would never flee from you. I will say it as many times as necessary, Hiroto Shinohara. I accept all your conditions, so accept my challenge!”

Kugasaki’s voice nearly cracked, but he managed to give his resolute declaration. It was a heroic performance, one truly worthy of the fantasy protagonist persona he presented.

“Heh... You’re on. I’ll prove how far beyond you I truly am, you weakling.” I

smirked triumphantly at Kugasaki.

#

“I’m so sorry!”

“...”

It was around nine in the evening.

After acting cool and accepting that request, I left the athletic field and returned home. However, the moment I opened the door, I went on my hands and knees before Himeji. No one forced me to; I just thought it was the only responsible approach.

What had I done? Well, I was only supposed to keep annoying Kugasaki. As a One Star, I had almost no chance of defeating him. Basically, I’d accepted a Game against him without Himeji’s permission. And our match was on Sunday, two days from now. I wouldn’t be surprised if this was the final straw for her.

“...”

Himeji eyed me without a word. I was too busy pressing my head against the floor to see her facial expression, but I’m sure it was full of disappointment, perhaps with anger a close second. Making Himeji feel that way filled me with regret.

Then, without warning, I heard footsteps. I raised my head a little, only to find Himeji closer than before, staring at me.

“...I would like to ask you a question, Master.”

“Huh? Um, sure. Ask as many as you like.”

“Thank you very much. So...you’ve had your head against the floor for a while now. Why are you apologizing? I would like to know the reason.”

“The reason? Isn’t it obvious?”

“No, it’s not. This is a very, very important point.”

Himeji looked more serious than I’d ever seen her. She wasn’t asking why I’d picked a fight with Kugasaki, or why I’d added the condition with Saionji to the Game. She only wanted to know why my head was against the floor. I didn’t

understand why that took priority in her mind, but I decided to reply as earnestly as I could.

“The reason I’m apologizing is simple. I literally just finished a Game, and now I’m causing more trouble for you and the others. My opponent is dangerous, and there’s no time at all to prepare for him... I’m really sorry! I totally regret this, so please, help me any way you can!!”

I started pressing my head against the floor again as I listed off frenzied excuses. I was already using the Company for my own ends, but I didn’t want to give its members more work than necessary. I had no grudge against Himeji and the rest of the team. But...I was still the one who had agreed to go through with this, I was the one who wanted to keep Kugasaki away from Saionji to protect our lies, and I was the one who had taken action to that end. There was no walking away from it now. I had to do all I could. Everything. Including...

“I...I’ll make dinner tonight, okay?!”

“Dinner is ready to be served already, Master. I prepared a Japanese menu tonight.”

“Thank you! Then...the cleaning! Let me do the cleaning!”

“I have already completed that. The floors will remain spotless, no matter where you decide to grovel.”

“You’re too perfect! Okay, uh... I know! I bet you’re tired and stuff, so I’ll give you a shoulder massage!”

“No, no, I’m used to this. Besides, a maid can hardly ask for that from her master. I do appreciate the thought, however.”

“Ugh... Is there nothing I can do? I’ll lick your shoes if I have to. Oh, but we leave our shoes at the front door. Then...maybe I can lick your socks?!”

“Th-that’s a little too deviant, Master! I’d like you to end this line of conversation immediately, please!”

Himeji blushed and took a step back, rubbing her thighs against each other. Yes, a male high school student licking a maid’s knee-high socks would be pretty messed up. In fact, it would probably be worse than licking her shoes.

Himeji pouted, but her eyes remained on me. Both hands gripped her skirt. “Um... I’m sorry, Master, but do you know what the term *pride* means?”

“Huh? Um...sure, but pride won’t let me keep this lie going...”

My head had come off the floor, but I was still on my hands and knees. I was plenty serious about what I’d said, too. I still had some pride, of course, but there were too many things at risk to bother with that.

“...*Hahhh*.” Himeji let out a quiet exhalation. “Ignoring your deviant ways for the time being...this is something of a relief to me.”

“A relief? How so?”

“If you were apologizing because you’d given up on your next Game, if you came to me saying sorry because you’d lose in two days despite all our help, I would’ve abandoned all hope for you. I might have grown angry, or cursed myself for not being able to help.”

“...”

“But that wasn’t the reason you gave. If this hands-and-knees groveling is merely shamelessly, selfishly asking for our help despite all the trouble it’ll cause, then my response is a given.”

Himeji looked at me with her clear blue eyes. Then she brought her right hand to her chest, bowing in an almost breathtakingly refined motion.

“There is no need to apologize. I am here, my master, to make you win.”

“Huh? So...”

“Yes. There is no need to cook dinner, or lick my socks, or whatever else. I will always be with you, Master. However, I do need you to understand that your next Game will be incomparably more difficult than any you’ve played so far. No matter how much we prepare, I doubt I’ll be able to guarantee victory for you in advance. Are you still willing to believe in me?”

“Ah...”

Himeji inclined her head, her silver hair swaying a little. Not to copy what she said, but my response was a given.

“...Yes. Of course.”

#

The next morning, I waited for someone at the roundabout near School Gate Station. It was early on a Saturday, but this was still the largest rail station in the ward, and there were a decent number of people around. Most were weekend travelers or just those looking for a distraction. No one paid attention to me.

“I guess the disguise is working.”

Himeji had given me something of a makeover. Nothing too intricate, really, but my hairstyle was a lot wilder, and I had a pair of designer sunglasses on. My plain jacket was something I’d brought from mainland Japan. I’d been sticking to my uniform recently, so this hopefully made me look pretty different.

“...I always thought a disguise was more about glasses and a mask, though...”

That might have worked in Tokyo, but it’d only make me more conspicuous on the Academy, so Himeji had tossed it out. And she had probably been right to do so. There was no better evidence than the guy walking by me with his hoodie zipped all the way up and the hood pulled completely over his head. Only his mouth was visible. People were bound to pick that guy out in a crowd immediate—

“Shinohara?”

When the hoodie guy got close to me, I heard a whisper in my ear. It was a familiar voice—Saionji’s. She must’ve been trying to go incognito like me. That gray hood concealed her red hair and ruby eyes pretty well. Her sweatshirt was nearly longer than the shorts she had on. Passersby might think it was the only thing she had on.

“Oh, good, it *is* you.” She lifted her hood a bit to reveal her face. “I wasn’t sure what I’d do if I got the wrong person.”

“Huh...? Why would that happen? I told you where I’d be.”

“Yeah, but your hair’s all different. You don’t look like Shinohara at all.”

“It wouldn’t be a very good disguise if I did. I didn’t recognize *you* at all, either. You seem far more different than usual compared to me.”

“Oh, you think so? Heh-heh! Do you like girls in hoodies?”

“No. I think you look more like a criminal than anything.”

“*Hmph!* No wonder you can’t get a girlfriend, Shinohara.”

Evidently, Saionji didn’t appreciate my response, because she turned away and began to walk off. That felt a little unfair. How could I call her cute when her face was almost totally obscured? She looked fine *under* the hood, but that had nothing to do with the sweatshirt.

Regardless, I followed her. Saionji’s bare legs were more visible than when she wore her skirt. The image of them burned itself into my mind, despite my attempt to banish the evil thoughts.

“Hey...,” Saionji called, her voice nearly a whisper. “Shinohara... Yesterday, um, did you do that for me?”

“...What’re you talking about?”

“You got Kugasaki to challenge you to a Game and added that condition.”

“Oh, nah. Nothing like that. I goaded him into it, but only to protect my lie. It doesn’t have anything to do with you.”

“Uh-huh. Well, I guess that’s fine. *Hahhh...* You seriously just do whatever you want.”

Saionji sounded as though she didn’t believe me one bit. Her voice and that sigh indicated she was more exasperated than angry.

“Don’t you know how talented Kugasaki is? I assumed you wanted to help me out of danger. If you lose, then all of this will be a wasted effort. You’re really stupid, Shinohara. Really stupid. I was so surprised yesterday that I couldn’t even say anything.”

“I...I have nothing to counter that with.”

“I’m sure you don’t. Bet you regret it now, don’t you? Heh-heh...”

As I hung my head apologetically, Saionji’s voice softened a little. Suspicious, I looked up and found she was peering at me. She kept her hands behind her back, and an impish grin peeked from underneath her hood.

“I was stunned. I thought you were stupid for agreeing to the Game. I even told myself I was done with you, but...I was also...just a tiny bit glad. So...um, thank you, okay?”

This was a surprising amount of honesty for Saionji. She prodded my chest with a finger. The point of contact turned hot. I was too preoccupied with worrying if she'd sense my pounding heartbeat to look her in the face.

“You...you don't need to thank me. I already told you that I agreed to Kugasaki's challenge for me. When you're in danger, I'm in danger, too.”

“...You know, when you beat around the bush like that, it almost sounds like you're trying to propose.”

“What?! Th-that's just your arbitrary interpretation!”

“Don't throw it back at me. So is that, um...is that what you want for us?”

“?!”

This out-of-the-blue question almost made me forget to breathe. Saionji's cheeks were red when I looked at her, yet she kept her ruby eyes pointed straight at me.

“Er... Anyway!!”

I couldn't stand the tense atmosphere around us after a moment, so I shouted to steer our runaway conversation back on course. I resented doing so because it felt like I'd lost some kind of competition. Saionji was fanning her face with both hands, though, so the heat must have gotten to her. Perhaps this could be judged a tie...whatever it was.

Regardless, why was I going to the trouble of meeting with Saionji (even disguising myself to do so) this early in the morning, the day before my fateful Game with Kugasaki? Well, naturally, it was so she could help with my strategy. Our entangled lies meant we had a strong coconspirator thing going, which was no doubt why she'd agreed to see me today...

“Shinohara, you're not working out your tactics alone, are you? You've definitely got some kind of cheating team helping, right?”

“It's a support team, not a cheating team. It's called the Company.”

“Same thing... That team’s a problem for me. I don’t want the truth of my lie spreading around so easily.”

Saionji restrained her words a little, but I understood her worry. The Company devised the strategies for my Games, and Saionji cooperating with me all but revealed her true self to them.

I lightly shook my head. “Actually, I don’t know very much about them, either. But their leader told me something...”

“What?”

“It was something like ‘Master, are you in contact with Miss Sarasa Saionji? If so, please bring her home tomorrow. I’ll make sure the other members of the Company aren’t around.’”

“...W-wow. The fact you make your team call you ‘Master’ is so mind-blowing, I’ve already forgotten whatever it was you said.”

“I don’t make her do it! She does it voluntarily!”

It still felt weird, honestly. I wasn’t sure I’d ever get used to it.

“I’ve never actually talked about you with her. She was the one who suggested out of nowhere that I should ‘bring the Empress over.’ We need a device with at least Six Star access to get any information on a Five Star like Kugasaki, and you’ve definitely competed with him more than anyone else.”

“I definitely understand your reasoning and all...but why does this servant of yours know that you and I are connected? Did you...?”

“I didn’t tell her. I’m never telling her any of that...but she knows, somehow. I don’t know a lot about the Company. The way she explained it, I think she’ll tell us once you come over.”

“If I come over, you mean. But all right.” Saionji sighed, making her exasperation with me evident. Then she pointed her right index finger at me. “I’ll join you at your place, all right? But, and I’m sorry for this, I’m not taking this disguise off, and I won’t do any talking. If I sense anything dangerous, I’ll leave and remain a mystery to your little crew forever.”

“Sure. That’s fine.”

“Mm. Oh, don’t you dare call me Akabane, all right?”

I chuckled a bit at that and shrugged. “I won’t, Miss Sarasa, I won’t.”

“Welcome home, Master... And good afternoon, young lady.”

Himeji greeted us upon our arriving at the mansion—a silver-haired, blue-eyed maid in the middle of this huge entry hall. The sight was akin to that of a living work of art, and I had to resist swooning, even as I said hello back. I took a peek at Saionji beside me. I still wasn’t really sure what was going to happen. Himeji had told me she’d explain everything once Saionji was here, but I was totally lost for now. My maid wore her usual cold, detached expression, and Saionji stood trembling, face concealed beneath her hood.

Wait, why is she shaking?

“Saionji? Hey, what’s up with yo—? Whoa?!”

“...!”

The moment I leaned down to speak to her, Saionji’s hand shot out to grab mine. She pulled me so that we both faced away from Himeji and then gave me a hard look.

“Wh-why? Why is *that* girl here?! Tell me what’s going on, Shinohara!”

“Um, what do you mean?”

Too close, too close, too close, nice smell, but too close...

My brain was distracted, but I did my best to reply.

“Didn’t I tell you? She’s the head of the Company.”

“Wha...?”

Saionji fell silent, her eyes wide open. I took a moment to turn around, only to find Himeji totally unaffected, as though she’d expected this response.

“Um... Himeji, do you happen to know who this is?”

“...I do. I have worked for the Saionji family in the past, you see. My longest stint with them was spent in service of their young lady—the real Miss Sarasa—so Miss Rina and I are acquainted with each other.”

“Oh? So you mean...”

“Yes, I am one of the few people who know about Miss Rina’s lie. It’s why I requested you reach out to the Empress in the first place, Master. I could tell from the context that the two of you aren’t enemies, at the very least.”

“I...see.”

Now it made sense. Saionji’s secret, her subbing in for the real Sarasa Saionji, was highly guarded information. But the nature of the lie meant that the Saionji family’s important servants had to know the truth. Since Himeji was privy to that information, I guess it was no surprise she’d predicted how things would turn out between Saionji and me, two deceivers guarding each other’s secrets.

“...Mm.”

Once I reasoned all that out, Saionji finally nodded, accepting her fate. Then she quietly turned around and flipped her hood back with both hands, releasing her long hair.

“Um,” she began while striding up to Himeji. “It’s been a while...huh, Yuki?”

“Indeed. Nearly a year has passed since we’ve met in person.”

“A year... Yes, I guess that’s right... Doing well?”

“Physically speaking, yes. Mentally... Well, there’s been ups and downs.”

There was a weird distance to their conversation. I couldn’t guess at why from my spot on the sidelines, but the phrase *a year* helped clue me in.

The real Sarasa was kidnapped one year ago, right? I don’t know how much of that story to believe, but maybe it’s all genuine?

This talk made a lot more sense if so. The weirdly awkward atmosphere remained a mystery, but I was sure it was better not to pry.

“Thank you for coming, Miss Rina. Normally, I would offer a more formal welcome, but sadly, we lack the time, so I’d like to get straight to business. Please follow me.”

“Ah... Okay,” Saionji replied, nodding.

Himeji spun around coolly, and Saionji followed. I kept pace a few steps

behind, still wondering what had happened between them.

“This is the Game that Mr. Seiran Kugasaki, Five Star and Unique Star holder, requested.”

We were in the theater room with the lights dimmed. Saionji and I were on the sofa, and Himeji stood beside the screen, speaking in her usual calm voice.

“The challenge is Self-Styled Game #27. A rather bombastic title, but simply put, it’s about collecting cards and playing numbers against your opponent.”

“Collecting cards...and playing numbers?”

“Yes. The first thing to note is that Self-Styled Game #27 is divided into two phases. The first one is the Collect Phase. During it, players will search the Fourth Ward for holographic cards with values between zero and nineteen. The object is to build a hand of up to five cards.”

“All around the ward? So we’ll be physically walking around, looking for cards?”

“That is right. You’ll be using the map app on your device. Once the Game begins, card locations will be shown on your map. When a player travels to that location, they will obtain that card.”

Himeji’s explanation was accompanied by a simple animation on the screen. If I understood right, I’d see card coordinates on my device, go to one particular location, and acquire the card. That sounded simple enough.

“Okay, what’s the other phase?”

“The second phase of Self-Styled Game #27 is called the Reveal Phase, where you use the cards you earned in the Collect Phase to battle your opponent. Each player will select a card from their hand, and whoever plays the one with the higher number wins the round. This will continue until both players run out of cards. Since your hand maximum is five, you must win at least three times to beat Mr. Seiran Kugasaki.”

I gathered my thoughts as I listened to Himeji. Basically, the Game involved collecting cards around the ward, then using them in a number-based battle. The rules didn’t sound all that tricky.

“What if both of us go after the same card? Whoever reaches it first earns it?”

“That is correct. A card disappears once obtained by a player. Now for some further detail. There are twenty cards in total, numbered from zero to nineteen, but not all the numbers and locations will be revealed at the start of the Game. At first, only a random five will be shown, and then one more will appear every five minutes. This means it will take over an hour before we’ll know where every card is.”

“Hmm... So it’s that kind of setup. Speed’s going to count for a lot, I guess,” Saionji said, speaking up before I could. She was right. Only a few cards were visible at a time, and each was first come, first served. Kugasaki and I were bound to run into each other.

“All right,” Himeji continued, “I’ve covered all the rules, but before we commence our strategy meeting, there’s one thing I need to tell you. This Game will pit a Five Star against a One Star—and while Games between these ranks have occurred before, no One Star has ever defeated a Five Star. Not ever.”

“Huh...? Not even once? But the Academy’s been around for over twenty years...”

“Not even once. That serves to demonstrate how absolute the ranking system is on this island. It’s set up to reward talented players with better weapons. When two competitors are separated by four ranks, there are no miraculous underdog wins.”

“I...I get that, but still...”

“Yuki’s right.” Before I could give much of an objection, Saionji cut in, sighing. She fixed me with her ruby eyes and went on in a calm voice. “Do you remember Variable Control, Shinohara? I used it in your first Game.”

“Huh? Oh, sure. You used it to cut my turn time down to one-tenth.”

“Right. But that Ability’s meant for more than cutting time limits. It lets you adjust any of the variables that might pop up in a Game. That includes the numbers written on those cards. And with Kugasaki’s rank, I bet he can up the values of his cards by a combined total of thirty. He might distribute those extra points to all his cards to strengthen his hand or throw them all on one to create

a card value beyond nineteen.”

“Beyond nineteen... Yeah, that would make it tough to win.”

I hated to admit it, but Saionji was certainly convincing. Variable Control was a general-purpose Ability, so I had access to it as well, but with the difference in stars, I’d never beat Kugasaki in a direct duel. No wonder you never saw major upsets in Games.

“All right,” Himeji said once Saionji and I stopped talking. “That’s the outline of our situation. Lower-ranked students are inherently saddled with an overwhelming disadvantage. They have the ability to choose the Game, which is meant to compensate for that weakness to some extent. However, in your case, Master, you don’t have that luxury. To be frank, your chance of winning Self-Styled Game #27 is less than one percent.”

Himeji sounded reluctant to tell me that, but we both knew there was no point hiding it. She was right. Functionally, I was a One Star, and Kugasaki was one of the more talented Five Stars. To an outsider, this probably seemed like the battle of the century, but in actuality, I was marching to my death. No matter what kind of strategy we came up with, Kugasaki could employ an Ability that would ruin everything.

I felt myself growing uneasy. But...

“...So it’s not a guaranteed loss.”

“That’s right. It’s an impossibly slim chance...but I don’t think it’s zero.” Himeji took a deep breath. “If this were a normal match, your best move would be to prepare for a very apologetic press conference the moment the Game was agreed upon. But you, Master, are in an extremely unusual position—you’re a fake Seven Star. The very peak, at least on the surface. Regardless of the truth, as far as Mr. Kugasaki is concerned, you are above him, and thus I’m sure he is thinking the same thing we are, that there’s no point staging a Variable Control bout with you, since he believes he’s of a lesser rank.”

“Oh, right. Do you think he’ll try something during the Collect Phase?”

“He is very likely to, yes. In fact, this entire Game revolves around the Collect Phase. It’s easy to pay more attention to the Reveal Phase since that’s when

you're directly competing with each other, but if both players go in assuming a bout with Variable Control, then the actual reveal of the cards will be little more than a ceremonial bonus. It won't even be a psychological battle, because the phase will largely be decided by the level of an Ability. And I doubt Mr. Kugasaki will take that sitting down."

"Sure. It'd be like him sitting quietly and handing over the win. He'd never do that."

"Exactly. And we're going to use that against him. We know he intends to attack us, so we'll block his actions and delay his card collecting. Meanwhile, Master, you'll collect the largest numbers you can find and build the ideal deck to win even if he uses Variable Control. That...is the only way. Hacking into a Five Star's device externally is impossible. If Mr. Kugasaki enters the Reveal Phase with a strong hand, you can consider yourself defeated."

Himeji delivered the cruel truth in her dispassionate monotone. Despite having known all this already, I was still stunned into silence. Under normal conditions, I would lose this Game ninety-nine times out of one hundred. Yet we were still trying to beat Kugasaki.

"...Hmm. So the next step is figuring out what Kugasaki will try." Saionji, who'd fallen into thought, lifted her face. "To block him, we'll need some insight into his strategy."

"As a Six Star, you can see his Abilities, right? Could we use that to narrow down which ones he's likely to pick?" I asked.

"Mmm. Typically, yes, but...one thing I can tell you is that Kugasaki always uses an Ability called Emergency Call-Up."

"...Emergency Call-Up?" I repeated.

"Yes," Saionji said, raising a finger. "It's kind of a symbol of Seiran Kugasaki's Five Star strength. It's limited to Four Stars and up, and as the name implies, it allows the user to bring in assistants during the Game."

"It gives you someone to help?"

"Right. Normally, it's against the rules for a third party to join or interfere with a Game. However, anyone brought in by Emergency Call-Up counts as a

participant. They're free to do whatever they want in the Game, and they're even allowed to bring a single Ability along."

"An Ability, too? Mmm... I see."

That was a lot to deal with. Kugasaki's Emergency Call-Up would bring in an ally who had another Ability. Using one Ability to gain another essentially meant Kugasaki's total was still three, but the extra body would definitely give him flexibility. He could also use an Ability he hadn't brought, albeit indirectly. That made his tactics more difficult to anticipate.

"You could call it a kind of tactics camouflage," I said.

"That's true. However, he's not allowed to bring in just anyone. There's a whole extensive request process... Remember that Kugasaki's weirdly popular, though." Saionji sighed.

The Self-Styled Holy Knights was an unsanctioned organization with over three hundred members. Kugasaki was its founder and leader, meaning he had three hundred different options he could choose from. It was unfairness on a scale like none I'd seen. I bit my lip in consternation, and Saionji gave me a little smile.

"There's no need to be so down. Emergency Call-Up is a problem...but you can also pretty much ignore whatever's in his third Ability slot."

"Oh... I can?"

"Yeah. You've probably heard from someone that Kugasaki's got a blue star, right? That gives him access to a limited Ability called †Jet-Black Wings†. And I don't know if he likes it a lot or just can't get rid of it, but ever since he obtained that color star, he's always slotted †Jet-Black Wings† in."

"Saying we can ignore it sounds hasty, though. It's a Unique Star, so it's definitely strong, right?"

"Don't be so sure. You already saw it for yourself. That white smoke, the fancy sound effects...those are the effects of †Jet-Black Wings†."

"..."

"...I understand if you're wondering how such a buffoon could be a strong

opponent, but he is, and there's no helping that. It's better not to think too deeply about it at all."

Saionji's expression was hard to gauge. It sounded like she had a lot of experience with this skill. Undoubtedly, it had given her trouble in the past.

"It's safe to say which Abilities Kugasaki will use: Variable Control, †Jet-Black Wings†, and then something else via Emergency Call-Up. As Yuki said, winning means dominating the Collect Phase, so I'm sure that 'something else' will be an attack Ability to help him during that portion. We can count on all of that, I think."

"Hmm. Hey, what would you do if you were going up against Kugasaki?" I asked.

"I put some thought into that earlier... A GPS spoofer might come in handy."

"A GPS spoofer?"

"Yeah. In this Game, you obtain cards by traveling to specified coordinates, right? So I'd probably install Control Position Data. It can change the perceived location of your device to anywhere you like. Set it to a card's coordinates, and you can pick up high numbers without actually going anywhere."

"...?! That's a real Ability?!"

"It's restricted to Five Stars and up, but yeah. And I think you can only invoke it five times per Game. However, your deck's limited to five cards anyway, so that's fine. Kugasaki prefers simple approaches to his victories. He'll definitely try something like that. As an alternative, he might employ a Search Ability to learn where all the cards are right away, although that might not be too realistic. Knowing the placement of each card and its value would be one thing, but a Search Ability would only tell you the former."

"And that's bad? Knowing where all the cards are sounds like a pretty key advantage."

"But the Game field is too large. Remember, it covers the entire Fourth Ward. You could spend all day walking and still not cover it all. Traveling from card to card without knowing where the strong ones are is super inefficient. The cards go up to nineteen, so the ones from zero to nine are essentially worthless. I

figure both sides will wait until the numbers are revealed on the map. That being the case, a competitor would prefer an Ability to get to a card the moment it pops up.”

“Ohh...”

I let out a deep breath, regarding Saionji with awe. She seemed so standoffish when we spoke in public, but once she entered Empress mode, she became so weirdly cool that I couldn’t help but be charmed. There was something unfair about it.

Anyway, we knew Kugasaki was liable to pick an offensive Ability like Control Position Data or something similar. If he did, it would leave him no room for defensive Abilities. He couldn’t prevent us from interfering with him, so attacking him, even if only a little, was a good plan.

“Himeji, are there any attack Abilities available to One Stars that would be useful?”

“Well...”

Himeji lowered her head. When she lifted it after a moment, her silver hair bounced slightly.

“In these conditions,” she said quietly, “I think your best option is Display Bug.”

“Display Bug... Can it mess up Kugasaki’s screen somehow? Could we change the card numbers on his display, or feed him fake coordinates?”

“That falls into the realm of its intended purpose, yes, but you can’t expect performance like that at level one. At best, you could do something like change the final number in a set of coordinates. That would be enough to trip up our opponent’s plans, however.”

“Mm... I see.”

I could tweak the displayed card locations on Kugasaki’s screen. If he tried invoking an Ability like Control Position Data, he wouldn’t find any cards, at least not for a little while. Buying some extra time didn’t sound bad to me.

I nodded in understanding, and Himeji’s clear blue eyes fixed themselves on

me. “As for the rest of your Ability set... It’s a standard move, but I think adding Luck is a good idea. That will make it more likely for larger numbers to pop up close to you. It won’t be incredibly effective since you’re technically a One Star, but it matches up well enough with our strategy.”

“That makes sense. And then we round it out with Variable Control in the third slot, right?” asked Saionji. “It won’t perform as well as his, but it’ll still boost your hand a little. But unlike Luck, it’ll show precisely what values were changed, so it could expose the fact that your Abilities are really weak.”

“Ahh... Well, I think I can talk my way out of that.”

Some onlookers might doubt me, but I could cover for that with an adequate performance. We didn’t have any better ideas, anyway.

“...All right. Now let’s go over the process we’ll use.”

Things were finally starting to fall into place in my mind when Himeji raised a finger to get my attention.

“During the Collect Phase of Self-Styled Game #27 tomorrow, I and the rest of the Company will make every effort to support you. In the meantime, Master, you need to invoke Display Bug to block Mr. Kugasaki’s moves and Luck to hopefully collect as many high-number cards as you can. With the level difference in Variable Control... Honestly, it’d be best if you could acquire all cards with a value of fifteen or higher.”

“All of them? I understand why you’d say that, but it sounds...”

“...Impossible?”

“Do you think it isn’t?”

“We’ll have to see. I just told you that we’ll make every effort to support you. And when I say ‘every effort,’ I mean we’ll show no mercy or discreteness. For example, tonight I’m going to contact Kagaya, our electronics expert, and have her break into the map app to replace the data with a fake map. Users won’t be able to tell, but we’ll move all coordinates slightly out of place. No one will find any cards by simply following the map. We can’t hack into a Five Star’s device, but the app itself is run by the island’s staff. We can use the Saionji family’s influence to break in.”

“...”

“Mr. Kugasaki won’t be able to rely on Control Position Data. He’ll need to physically search for cards instead. The coordinates will only be slightly off, so he’ll still obtain the cards if he gets close enough to their locations; however, Self-Styled Game #27 is played across a vast field. Mr. Kugasaki doesn’t have a driver’s license. He’ll need to rely on public transit... Unfortunately, all the buses and trains he’ll take tomorrow will be offline for inspection. For some reason, they’ll all be out of service.”

Himeji’s expression hardly changed at all as she wove this incredibly complex web of underhandedness. Her clear blue eyes shone 50 percent brighter than usual. She seemed so vibrant. Yet she hesitated after giving her plan outline.

“I’m sorry, Master. Um... Is this troubling for you?”

“Huh? What’re you talking about?”

“I know what I like, but I also understand that cheating is generally frowned upon. It’s a little late to say this, I realize...but I’ve never heard your opinion on the Company’s actions, Master.”

“Ah, right...”

Apparently, my silence had made her think I wasn’t a fan of cheating. Honestly, I was amazed by it all, and keeping quiet had been my mistake. I met those blue eyes that watched me searchingly.

“Himeji, I can’t speak for anyone else, but cheating or not, it’s all the same to me. If it keeps my lie safe and gets me closer to my goal, then fine. I’ve got no issues with you at all. You always help me out, and your whole rundown was seriously cool. Anyway, er...that’s how I feel.”

“Oh... All right. Good.”

Himeji smiled a bit, looking more confident. Beside me, Saionji whined, “Who calls a girl cool when they’re trying to compliment her?” but I’d meant every word of it, so I didn’t care.

Himeji cleared her throat. “Regardless, that’s how tomorrow will go. I’m afraid that even if everything proceeds well, our chances are still worse than a

coin flip. But there is a possibility for us to win.”

“Right. Variable Control, Luck, and Display Bug...I think that’s a good combo. Probably about the best Shinohara has right now.”

Saionji’s affirmation came as a relief.

“Really? That puts my mind at ease a little. Can I say something, Himeji? Display Bug is a general-purpose Ability officially released by the Academy. Would it be possible for the Company to create an Ability with the same effect? Then it might be able to help during the Reveal Phase, too.”



“It’s certainly possible...but I’m not sure it would amount to much. Like I said, Self-Styled Game #27 is mainly fought in the Collect Phase.”

“Right, but a little extra insurance couldn’t hurt.”

“...All right. If you say so, Master.”

Himeji sounded doubtful, but she accepted. She closed her eyes for a bit, mulling over my request, then approached me as though remembering something. She stopped before my spot on the sofa, toying with a lock of hair with a finger as she leaned down. When we were in such close proximity, my heart would race no matter what happened.

Himeji’s face practically touched mine as she whispered, “By the way, Master...you haven’t installed your general-purpose Abilities yet, have you?”

“...! N-no, I haven’t dealt with them yet...”

“In that case, please take out your device. You can access the Academy’s official store via the bottom left icon on your home screen...”

Himeji brought a finger near my screen to lead me through the specifics. She was standing over me and looking down at such an angle that our foreheads nearly met. Her hair tickled my arm. If I looked up, her chest, wrapped in that maid uniform, would be right there to greet me. There was no way I could risk lifting my eyes.

“...Master? Are you listening?”

“Y-yes! No! I wasn’t!”

“Please try to... I’ll start at the beginning again.”

Himeji frowned slightly as she reviewed the installation process for general-purpose Abilities. Banishing all distractions from my mind (for real this time), I successfully followed along.

“All right, Master; that’s perfect. I’ll work on your Display Bug request later. At most it should only require a few hours. I think that rounds out our strategy.” Himeji’s smile lasted only a moment. By the time she stood and moved away from me, it was gone. She bowed gracefully. “I will report back to Kagaya and the others about what we discussed. It wouldn’t do to risk them overhearing

Miss Rina's voice, so I will go to another room."

Himeji left, my device in her hands. I was just about to stand up and stretch when Saionji grabbed my arm. Curiously, her cheeks were red.

"Hey! Wait a minute, Shinohara! What—what was that?!"

"Whoa! You scared me... What was what?"

"That! That thing just now! Your exchange with Yuki...it felt so dirty to me. Is that the kind of relationship you have with her?!"

"Wha—?! Don't be stupid! Of course not! She was just teaching me how to use my device!"

"B-but...she was so close to you. She wouldn't even go near a man before. And now she's getting so close... It was practically like you were kissing!"

"It's not 'practically' anything!!" I protested, feeling heat rise to my cheeks. "If I had to guess, she's just trying to get over that fear because she's supposed to serve me. There's nothing inappropriate like what you're suggesting. I admit we've gotten closer since my first day, but..."

"Th-there! You see? Exactly as I suspected! *Ugh...* You're always like this, Shinohara!"

"...Why are you so upset over it?"

"I'm not!!!" Saionji shouted, broadcasting her foul mood.

I'd like to mention that all her arm grabbing had her a lot closer to me than Himeji had ever been. It was a pretty big sofa, but she sat right next to me, so we were constantly touching. She really needed to pay more attention to what she was doing. (I was acting calm, but my heart was racing.)

"*Hmph...* You know, Shinohara..." Saionji had been pouting a moment earlier, but now there was something different to her voice. "I know you've got a lot to consider right now, but...um, are you mad?"

"Mad? At you? Why?"

"W-well, I mean, if I wasn't around, you'd never have to compete in a Game against Kugasaki, right? It's mostly you getting what you deserved, but I think

I'm just a tiny bit at fault, too... So I wanted to ask."

She stared at me with those ruby eyes, anxiety plain in them. I felt obligated to shake my head, though not because of her worry.

"I'm not angry at all. Besides, we're partners in crime, and Kugasaki's our common enemy. It's only natural that I'd want to eliminate him."

"Okay, but... How do I say this...?"

Saionji was considering her words far more than usual. She looked pretty lost. I had seen her this way during our secret meeting three days before, too—that little detectable sense of conflict before she revealed her whole story. That slight hesitation.

"...I'm sorry. Never mind."

After a good half minute of ruminating to herself, Saionji opted to keep her mouth shut. That worried me somewhat, but trying to pry the words out of her wasn't worth it. I just said, "All right" and left it at that.

Shortly after that, Himeji returned.

"...I've finished speaking with the Company. I will work out your transport and how we'll stay in contact during the Game with Kagaya later. For now, we have our outline for tomorrow. Thus, I think we've reached the end of what Miss Rina can contribute. However..."

"What?"

"Well, it's five thirty. Admittedly, that's a little early, but since you're here... would you care to join us for dinner, Miss Rina?"

When it came to cuisine, there was no denying Himeji's talents, in both quality and speed of preparation.

"Zzzzzz..."

"Has Miss Rina fallen asleep?"

Approximately half an hour after Himeji began cooking, Saionji went to the dining room with me and promptly passed out in her chair, head on the table.

"Yeah. I guess all this thinking tired her out. Are you ready? I can wake her

up.”

Himeji quietly shook her head. “No, that’s all right. It’ll take a while longer.” She watched Saionji with something like conflict on her face.

After wavering about whether to ask, I decided to go for it.

“Himeji, why did you avoid her? You’re acquainted but haven’t met in a year. Ah, sorry. You don’t have to answer that if you don’t want.”

“...”

Himeji said nothing for a few seconds. Instead, she circled around the table to Saionji.

“No, I’m not the one avoiding her. It’s more Miss Rina. Actually, I suppose I should just call her Rina.”

“...You two were that close?”

“Yes. Rina and I are the same age, and we used to see each other daily. We were best friends. She, Sarasa, and I.”

“But she started avoiding you?”

“That’s right. It began a year ago... When Sarasa disappeared, Rina suddenly became distant. She wouldn’t even look at me when we talked.”

I couldn’t detect any anger or sadness in the tone of Himeji’s voice. I didn’t know if she was bottling it up or if that was just how things were now. It still felt sad to me, though.

“It’s just a feeling, but I think Rina is hiding something. A secret other than her posing as Sarasa, I mean. One she’s keeping from the Saionji family and me. Rina’s a smart girl, so I can’t figure out what’s going through her mind. I can’t help. And that’s...a little frustrating. That’s why it’s hard for me to smile around her.”

Himeji smiled at Saionji as she spoke. Then she reached out with her right hand and gently ran it across the other girl’s long red hair.

Her blue eyes moved to me.

“This has nothing to do with the Game or the Company. It’s just my own

selfishness.”

“ ...”

“But if...if you could stand by Rina’s side, Master...if you can be with Sarasa Saionji and Rina Akabane as well...then please protect her for me. I know how stubborn she is, but deep down, she’s a really weak girl.”

Himeji smiled a little. But before I could respond, she turned and left for the kitchen.

Final Chapter

The Lying Genius

#

“And now...let the Collect Phase of Self-Styled Game #27...begin!!”

“““Yeaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaaahhh!!””””

Sunday, April 10. The audience, which was large because this was a day off, roared in reply to Kazami the emcee.

We were back at the Principal Athletic Field in the Fourth Ward, the same place where I’d had my last Game. Unlike for that match, though, the arena (capacity: five thousand) was completely full. Apparently, nearly twice as many people were watching the event live via Libra’s ITube app. At the risk of sounding like I’m bragging, the day’s event, the Academy’s strongest versus Seiran Kugasaki, was exactly as popular as I’d anticipated.

“Just as amped up as ever.”

Kazami’s intense announcing during the countdown to the Game was nearly overwhelming, and I wasn’t even on the field. I was actually watching the stream, like most other people. At present, I was by the front gate to Eimei School. As I’d learned the day before, Self-Styled Game #27 was divided into two phases, and the initial Collect Phase took place across all of the Fourth Ward. Therefore, I’d been given time to decide where I wanted to begin.

Anyway, the Game was on, so I looked at my device again. Cards had already popped up—two, five, nine, fourteen, and seventeen appeared on my map. There was no telling whether my Luck Ability had influenced any, but they were all concentrated fairly close to me.

A soft voice came over my earpiece.

“Connection complete. If you can hear me, Master, then please respond.”

“A-OK here. There’s a helicopter in the air above me, but I doubt it can pick up my voice from that high. I deployed Display Bug, so we’re good on that front. Fourteen’s the closest to me; should I go for that first?”

“Yes. Best to pick up one card for now. Then, if a new card greater than seventeen shows up, head for that. Otherwise, your second target is seventeen.”

“Roger. Seventeen’s a decent distance away, though. Should I take a bus?”

“Sounds good. The route between fourteen and seventeen happens to be serviced by a bus route. We’ll place a fake bus at the stop that’ll take you directly over.”

“Whoa... That’s pretty unfair.”

I snickered to myself as I ran for my current target. My remark wasn’t meant to be disapproving. It was more an expression of my appreciation for the team helping me. Himeji seemed to understand the nuance—the radio silence suggested she approved (I think).

As I ran along, I realized something. One of the five cards on the map, the five, was gone. The Game had been going for less than five minutes, yet my opponent already had a card in hand. I reported this to Himeji with trepidation in my voice.

“I see,” she replied coldly. “That was rather fast. Perhaps he happened to start near that card’s coordinates. We are obfuscating the actual positions, but it’s little more than a polling error in size...and the cards are holographically projected, so you can visually see them. If you’re physically there, the map interference is little more than stalling for time.”

“Mm... Right, yeah. Nothing to be surprised about.”

“Exactly, Master. However, he has likely realized now that the coordinates on his map are slightly off. We’ll have to see what he does next.”

That was true. Kugasaki’s first pickup had been quick, but he’d only claimed a five, a pretty low number. Even if he realized what we were up to, it’d still keep him from using Control Position Data. And while I had him stopped cold, I could grab some of the higher numbers...

“...!”

A quiet yelp came through the earpiece.

“Uh...Himeji? Hey, what’s up?!”

“Er... I’m sorry. I was thrown for a moment. I’m watching a live feed from Libra... Apparently, Mr. Kugasaki has just obtained his second card.”

“...Huh?”

Himeji’s tighter-than-usual voice made me stop running. Kugasaki had a second card? That was impossible. No new cards had disappeared from the map. I still saw the two, nine, fourteen, seventeen, and seven. The last one had appeared a few moments before. None of them were missing. They hadn’t been taken.

“I still count five of them, yet Kugasaki’s increasing his card total?”

“Yes... Kazami of Libra stated that Mr. Kugasaki likely acquired a card that hasn’t been revealed yet. The arena display’s showing his cards, but they’re listed as five and ‘unknown,’ still face down since its value hasn’t been announced.”

“An unknown value... Wait, so is Kugasaki using a Search Ability?”

The panic was clear in my voice. I frowned. Saionji had explained that Search could give Kugasaki the coordinates he needed. If he knew where all the cards were at the start of the Game, he could definitely pick some up before their locations were announced. Evidently, his taking a card never placed on the map didn’t affect the information on my device.

“I—I have nothing to counter that... I thought we agreed that this was an ineffective strategy. He doesn’t know what the numbers are, which should make this method too slow.”

“Yeah. I should...”

I nodded, right hand covering my mouth. It was definitely too inefficient. The combination of Variable Control, †Jet-Black Wings†, and Search wouldn’t give him a fast way to gather cards. He couldn’t be accomplishing this without Search, though.

“Do you think he’s using Variable Control?” I asked.

“Oh? Has it finally dawned on you, Seven Star? Looks like you’re good at thinking on your feet, at least.”

“Kugasaki?!”

My eyes shot open when that irritating voice suddenly came through my device. It was Seiran Kugasaki, the Five Star closest to the Empress in skill. Why should he bother reaching out to annoy me while using his mysterious tactics to get an early lead?

Taking a moment to ensure Himeji wouldn’t butt in, I calmed myself and replied, “You... How are you talking to me? You can’t know my device ID.”

“People often get the wrong idea about my †Jet-Black Wings†. It’s actually a performance-enhancing Ability. In addition to creating stage effects, I can use it to throw my voice and listen to others over long distances. Pretty useful, huh?”

“Huh. So what do you want? I hope you didn’t get in touch just to brag about Abilities.”

“Of course not. Heh... Listen, Seven Star. Tell me if I’ve got your plan right. I can’t beat you in raw Variable Control power, which means I have to do well during the Collect Phase. And because I have †Jet-Black Wings†, I can’t install any defensive Abilities. You intended to block my plans without resorting to Cancel Interference like last time.”

“...”

The details were off a bit because he believed I was a genuine Seven Star, but he was basically correct. I stood in silence while Kugasaki continued gleefully.

“Heh-heh... It sounds as though I am correct. In that case, I’ve got news for you. Your strategy will fail. I lured you into reaching that conclusion.”

“...What?”

“Huh? You still don’t get it, Seven Star? Basically, I can read every word, every letter, of your tactics. None of your attack Abilities affect me. If this continues, my victory is guaranteed. Not bad, right?”

His cocky voice stuck in my mind. I knew he was trying to unnerve me, yet I

couldn't help but grit my teeth. My stomach churned with frustration.

"Ha... All right. Playtime is over. You have two seconds, Shinohara."

Kugasaki hung up.

Two seconds? Naturally, they passed by quickly. Nothing happened, however. The Game had only been running for ten minutes. We weren't close to the end countdown for the first half yet.

Wait. Ten minutes?

I gaped at the time display on my device.

"...This is insane."

I finally understood. The problem was that nothing had happened. The Game had reached the ten-minute mark. A new card should have appeared, like the seven had five minutes before. However, no new card showed up on my map.

"...!"

The ominous chill coursing down my spine jolted me into action. I projected the Libra live feed in front of me, and the first thing I saw was the large screen in the arena and the two player hands displayed on it. I expected it to display no cards for me, and two for Kugasaki, a five and that unknown one. However, the information on the board had changed.

"Five and ten..." Himeji was back. She sounded a little puzzled. *"I'm not sure what to make of this. I haven't heard anything about Mr. Kugasaki picking up a ten. And what happened to the unknown card from before...?"*

"Well, that's the trick."

"...What?"

"Those aren't two different things. They're connected. The facedown card in Kugasaki's hand turned into the ten. More accurately, the previously unknown number was revealed to be a ten."

"Revealed...? Oh..."

"Yeah. The Game just passed the ten-minute mark, but we didn't get any new information... At least, that's what it looks like to us. But there was new data,

the value of the unknown card.”

Presumably, if a player picked up a facedown card, that number would be revealed whenever the next five-minute interval came along, rather than a new card appearing on the map.

It all came together to reveal how Kugasaki’s strategy operated.

“Basically, Kugasaki used Search to learn all the card locations, and now he’s trying to continually pick up cards ahead of us. That way, there’ll always be a facedown card in his hand, which gets flipped over after five minutes, denying any new information. We can deal with that once, but if he keeps it up...I’ll only be able to get the cards I can see on my device.”

“S-so Mr. Kugasaki is trying to hoard all the cards from the start?!” Himeji’s voice wavered.

Honestly, I was just theorizing, but from what I could tell, that was Kugasaki’s plan. Continually grabbing cards that weren’t on-screen blocked any new data from reaching me. He’d keep that going until the first phase of the Game ended.

“Also...I don’t think he’s got Variable Control installed at all. I doubt our interference is working on him. I think his third Ability is for defense.”

“Sacrificing Variable Control for protection... It’s not out of the question, but would he be willing to make such a tough commitment? Because in the Reveal Phase, you’ll be competing with the values of your cards, not how many you’ve collected. He can only carry five cards in his hand, so if he collects a sixth, he’ll have to discard one... Isn’t this Game about quality over quantity?”

“That’s true, but...” Himeji was trying to cling to hope. Unfortunately, I had to disappoint her. “In the Reveal Phase, we’re taking cards from our *hands* and playing them against each other. There are five rounds, and the first to win three takes the Game. So what happens if I end the Collect Phase with fewer than three cards?”

“Ah...”

Himeji was at a loss for words. I was right. That had to be what Kugasaki was after. If he gathered eighteen cards, he couldn’t lose. He didn’t need Variable

Control at all. His plan required Search and a way to protect it. It was the perfect setup for hoarding the entire stock of cards. Himeji, Saionji, and I had never seen this coming.

“...This is bad.”

“More than just bad, Master! I just received word that the bus Kagaya’s driving has been stopped by a road closure!”

“Huh? The road’s closed...?”

“Yes. Apparently, vehicles bearing the symbol of Mr. Kugasaki’s Self-Styled Holy Knights have been barreling around the ward since this morning, and the authorities are trying to stop them. Now I see how he obtained cards so quickly. It’s likely that Mr. Kugasaki’s using his Self-Styled Holy Knights as his arms and legs!”

“What?! But third parties can’t get involved in Games... Oh, wait.”

I rejected that idea reflexively, then swiftly realized my error. Any student summoned via Emergency Call-Up became a participant who could provide aid. This wasn’t a rule infraction.

“H-he found a way around all of our countermeasures...” There was defeat in Himeji’s voice as it sank to a whisper. *“There—there’s no way out of this, Master. If he’s shut down our cheating, then I can do nothing. Our slight chance at victory hinged on everything going smoothly, but it’s all been upturned.”*

“...No. It’s not over yet.”

“What else can we possibly do?!”

It was rare to hear Himeji this worked up. It only lasted a second, though. She muttered, “...Sorry,” then went quiet, as though giving up.

That was exactly when I finally reached my first card, number fourteen. However, getting to seventeen would be difficult without a bus. If I tried taking a train, Kugasaki or one of his allies would beat me to it.

Death bells sounded in my brain.

“...Oh. There you are, Shinohara.”

Huh? Urasaka?!

That monster bike skidded past me and came to a stop just ahead. When the rider took off her helmet, out came Urasaka, the girl I'd beaten in a Game two days before.

"Wh-what's a biker like you doing here?"

"I'm not a biker... Whatever. I came here 'cause I was asked to. 'If you're going out, give Shinohara a ride.'"

"Who asked you?"

"No clue. It was this super-suspicious anonymous DM on STOC."

"And you actually agreed to it? Why would anyone do that? It's a wasted effort anyway. I'll be disqualified if I get on your bike."

"What, because I'm a third party? That's no problem. Check it out. I got a commercial driver's license. Starting today, I'm giving people rides for some extra cash. I haven't come up with a name yet, but it's like a taxi service. A taxi counts as public transport, you know, and no one's been disqualified for taking a cab during a Game. Or that's what the provost who gave me my business license said. What was her name? Something Ichinose."

"...?!"

Wait... The provost?! No way that's a coincidence. Did she foresee all of this?

"Look, are we gonna talk all day or what? Hop on."

Urasaka waved me over. After weighing my options a little, I decided to climb on the black punk-rock bike. I hurriedly donned the helmet she gave me.

"You're on? Okay. Grab on to me, all right? Don't get all worked up about me being a girl, either. We're gunning it to your destination!"

Uwahhhhhhhhhhhhhhhhh!

After Urasaka's cinematic line, her monster motorcycle took off like the wind. If Kugasaki and I were headed for the same card, there was no way he'd beat me to it now. I was certain of it. I also swore off roller coasters and other thrill rides for the foreseeable future.

“Okay, my work is done. Good luck in the Game, Shinohara.”

“Th-thanks...”

We reached our goal in the blink of an eye.

I was now at the very far end of the Fourth Ward, on a block pretty close to the café Saionji had invited me to. This was the border zone shared with the Third Ward, which lay right across the street. I wasn’t sure if that was why, but the TV helicopter hadn’t followed me here. Had I made the same trip on the train, it would’ve taken far too much time.

When I checked the map, I saw that my target coordinates were in a low-rise building—somewhere on its third or fourth floor, to be specific. It took around a minute to find the place.

“...Whoa.”

With Himeji’s guidance (she spoke far less now, but she still offered little bits of advice), I managed to reach it without getting too lost. But it wasn’t anything like what I’d imagined. It was a building, yes, but I guessed construction had been abandoned somewhere midway through. In fact, it was nothing but bare reinforced concrete, like you’d see on a fresh construction site, extending about four stories up. The exterior was still covered in blue tarps to protect it from the elements.

Inside, I saw nothing but empty space. Being somewhat shut off from outside light and air, it was dim and musty. Far above was the roof, although it was more of a grimy tarp. It was nothing but sheer vacant space in here, no floors to speak of. Maybe the structure was meant to be a big concert hall, or perhaps floors were supposed to be installed later. Either way, there was nothing here now.

On the right was a temporary metal stairway, one put there for construction workers, presumably. That was my only way up.

“...Okay.”

I felt hesitant, but the only thing to do was climb. The aluminum stairs clanged concerningly with every step, and the sounds echoed throughout the empty building. I tried not to think about it as I approached the card’s location,

step-by-step.

“Mr. Kugasaki has obtained his seventh card.”

Himeji’s voice lacked its usual relaxed confidence. Suppressing the growing panic in my mind, I reached what would have been the third floor.

“...Oh, no way.”

That was all I could manage to say. I hadn’t really been able to tell from below...but the stairway between the third and fourth floors had been all but destroyed. The handrails remained, but nearly none of the steps did. They must have corroded away after being exposed to the elements for too long.

However, when I strained my eyes, I spotted the card hologram just ahead. So, grabbing the handrail with my left hand, I thrust my right in the air, holding my device up high. All my weight was on the handrail, and there was no telling when the step beneath me might collapse. I kept my other foot on the third-floor landing and slowly leaned forward.

Phew... Stay calm. This is the third floor. I’ll be in trouble if I fall, but I’m being careful, so that’s not going to happen. Yeah... Calm down, and don’t—

Maybe my thought was ironic foreshadowing.

“...Uh?”

The moment my device overlapped with the card hologram, there came a gut-wrenching screech of bending metal. Before I realized the handrail had given way, I was tumbling through the air.

#

...I was only barely awake.

I’d covered my head with my arms, so it was fine, but the rest of me throbbed in pain. I was bleeding a bit from my limbs. What remained of the temporary stairway was scattered on the ground. It made the place resemble a crime scene.

My device had fallen out of my hand when I dropped, so I didn’t know how much time had passed. I wanted to contact Himeji, but my earpiece had fallen out, and I couldn’t find it.

“...Ooh...”

My surroundings were blurry, but I tried to check how well I could move. Luckily, nothing was broken. At worst, I had some light sprains but wasn't immobile.

“That's good...but...”

My personal health wasn't the issue. The Game—what was going on with my Game against Kugasaki? I definitely obtained the seventeen card, but that meant I only had two cards in my hand. Two. If Kugasaki collected the other eighteen at this point, the Game was already over.

“No... It's too soon to give up yet. I'm the only player with Variable Control, and I'm carrying a fourteen and a seventeen. As long as I can find a third card, I might even have an advantage...”

“The hell you do, stupid.”

“...Huh?”

I was talking to myself to gather my scattered thoughts, yet another voice bluntly denied my remark. It was a suspiciously familiar one, too. When I followed it to its origin, I spotted Sarasa Saionji, her arms crossed. She looked more displeased than I'd ever seen her.

“...”

She stared at me for a few moments, then brought her arms down and marched over to me. Once she was right in front of me, she rested one hand on her hip and averted her eyes a bit, like someone giving an excuse.

“Um...look...don't get the wrong idea...”

“...? Wrong idea about what?”

“Me being here. You're totally misunderstanding, right? I'm not here because I'm worried about you. I didn't ask Urasaka for help, and I didn't get worried when she said, ‘It was a pretty dangerous-looking place. Why don't you check up on him later, mystery lady?’ Also, I'm not a mystery lady. So...you know, it's just a coincidence. I was walking around to kill some time, and I happened to see you here.”

“...Oh? That’s sure one crazy coincidence.”

I couldn’t help but laugh. This act was so very like Saionji.

Interacting with her during a Game would normally be a little dangerous, but as I’d confirmed earlier, there was no helicopter shooting footage around here. Saionji didn’t seem too alarmed about helping. Anyone nearby must’ve been safely shooed away.

“Hey, Saionji, do you know what time it is? How long was I out?”

“I don’t know when you fell unconscious, idiot...but a little more than thirty minutes have passed since the Game began. There’s still over an hour left in the Collect Phase, but most of the cards are already taken.”

“Oh... Well, good. At least it’s not over. Listen, Saionji, can you ask the band girl to come back here for me?”

“...What for?”

“What else? I think I can walk okay, but it’s going to be hard to run. Kugasaki’s gonna take all the cards if I just stagger around. I need to get back in this as soon as I ca—”

“Quit being so stupid!”

Saionji, cutting me off, crouched down to get a closer look at my face. I was still on the ground, so this was my first good look at her ruby eyes since she’d shown up. They were filled with steely resolve.

“I already called for her a moment ago. Do I need to do it again? Because I will! Stupid, stupid, stupid, stupid! You need an emergency room, not another card! I’m not in a position to help you, but I can at least call for an ambulance. You need to get checked out right now!”

“...”

Her serious tone left no room for humor. The intensity made me gasp a little. Saionji seemed genuinely concerned about my condition, which helped me realize I was in pretty bad shape. However...

“What are you talking about, Saionji? I can’t afford to lose this. Now’s no time to go to a hospital.”

“Yes, it is! ...I had no idea you were this stupid. Well, let me spell it out for you in a way you’d better understand. You need to resign right now, Shinohara. At this point, there’s no way left for you to win. It’s *impossible*.”

“...! Why are you saying that...?”

“Oh, are you angry? I’m only telling the truth.”

“No. I’m... You’re screwed, too, if I lose. Shouldn’t you be forcing me back to my feet?”

The question came out heated more because of my astonishment than because of any animosity.

“The *real* Sarasa Saionji is still missing, isn’t she? You’re posing as her so you can get her back, aren’t you? You’ve been fighting for this the past year, right? Don’t just give all that up because I’m a little hurt. Your lie’s no longer your own, all right? We’re partners in crime. If you decide to duck out on me, I’ll be in deep trouble.”

“...!”

“Listen. I don’t want to lose this. I can’t let it end like this. For myself, for this girl I’ve never met before, and maybe just a *little* for you. So just drop whatever’s telling you to get in my way.”

“...I’m not getting in your way!” she replied, her voice shaky. Then she glared hard at me for a while with tears in her eyes. It was clear she wanted to say something, but she held it back. Seeing Saionji appear so frail reminded me of Himeji’s words. This was a girl fighting by herself, keeping something secret even from the Saionji family. Something vital.

I didn’t know how much time passed before Saionji finally nodded. “...It’s a lie,” she whispered.

“Huh? What?”

“...Don’t make me say it again, Shinohara! I had to drum up a lot of courage for this!”

“Wait, it’s my fault now?! Well, sorry! But I have no idea what you said, so one more time, please!”

“I told you...!”

Saionji gave in and shut her eyes. Then, in a much louder, almost defiant voice, she shouted it at me.

“I mean about Sarasa being kidnapped! That was all me telling a lie!!”

“...What?”

It took a little bit to comprehend the admission.

“W...wait, Saionji. What do you mean?”

“I mean exactly what I said, all right? Sarasa—the *real* Sarasa Saionji—hasn’t been kidnapped at all. She’s fine. She’s attending high school over in mainland Japan. She can’t remain inconspicuous with the last name Saionji, though, so she’s adopted an identity similar to my real one. That’s basically it.”

“That’s it, huh?” My confused brain went into overdrive trying to process this. The best I could do was ask, “Why? Why would she do that?”

“Because it’s what she wanted. I told you a little about it already. Her family basically held her hostage until she graduated middle school. She was going to be forced to participate in the star-hunting system in high school to establish herself as the family heir. But...I heard her. When she was half-asleep, she confessed, ‘I sure wish I could’ve gone to a normal school.’”

“...”

“Sarasa’s a good girl, so she’d typically never admit that to anyone. She resigned herself to her family’s plan and followed it to the letter. But she wanted to be free. And...well, don’t you see? After I heard that, I wanted to do something. It’s not like she explicitly asked me to. I wanted to surprise her. So...I decided to pretend that Sarasa had been ‘kidnapped.’ I took her back to the mainland and made it look like an abduction.”

“...All by yourself? You against the entire Saionji family?”

“Yes. By myself. I’m a genius, remember? And the Saionji family is beholden to whatever Masamune dictates. I didn’t have any help getting Sarasa.”

“Yeah, but...what about Himeji? She worked with Sarasa and used to be close with her. Couldn’t you have teamed up with her?”

“Absolutely not, stupid.”

Who knew how many times I’d been called stupid today? It had kind of pissed me off at first, but once I considered it a natural part of Saionji’s dialect, it started to sound cute... Maybe I was deluding myself.

Saionji, still crouched down beside me, sighed. “You have to understand. Masamune Saionji’s the most powerful man on the island, and he’s really set in his ways. He’ll punish everybody involved if he discovers a plot that goes against what he wants for the Saionjis.”

“Oh... Right.”

“Plus, this lie is set to expire. Sarasa will graduate in two years, and it will come out. Knowing that, how could I drag Yuki into it? Listen, I don’t think you know this, but I really love Yuki. She’s every bit as important a friend to me as Sarasa. That’s why I couldn’t tell her. I’m even deceiving Sarasa. I told her the Saionji family decided to transfer her to another school.”

There was sardonicism in Saionji’s voice. Another lie had been lurking behind her first this whole time, one dearer to her that could normally never be revealed to anyone. And yet here she was, fighting through tears, as she laid it out for me.

“It’s fine. Just concede already. If my lie’s revealed, then Sarasa’s dream will never come true...but I’ll be the only one to blame. Yuki wasn’t involved in the kidnapping, and Sarasa doesn’t know the truth, either. I’m sure nothing bad will happen to you, either. I’m the one who posed as Sarasa Saionji and sat on the Seven Star throne for a whole year. So please...quit being stubborn and just resign, Shinohara. Because if you keep doing this, you really will die eventually!”

Her order sounded more like a scream this time. Undoubtedly, she’d been anticipating a collapse since all of this had begun the year before. She was prepared to be held accountable the moment anything went awry. That’s why she’d kept even Himeji at arm’s length—to protect this second lie.

Now she was even trying to help me. That’s why she’d revealed all of this to me. Saionji was offering herself to me as a sacrifice, telling me to use her as a scapegoat, despite looking ready to cry.

“...”

After hearing the truth, I lowered my gaze and sank into thought. Saionji's true feelings, my complicated predicament, and the little bit of selfish desire Himeji had revealed around me. I replied with all of that in mind.

“Ah... Now it makes sense.”

“...What?”

I could tell Saionji's mouth was hanging open. She likely hadn't expected my reaction, but I paid that no mind.

“When I asked about your lie before, I thought it didn't feel characteristic of you.”

“Uh...wait. So you knew I wasn't being totally honest?”

“No, I wasn't that certain. I only wondered if posing as your friend after she was kidnapped to bait the criminal was really the kind of plan you'd go for. I mean, you challenged me to a Game after an obvious accident! If there was truly an abduction, you wouldn't rest until you found those responsible and took them down.”

“Ah... Y-yeah. Maybe.”

Saionji meekly nodded as she looked into my eyes. Honestly, I was surprised to hear her confirm my idea. This was the girl who'd deceived the Saionji family for an entire year. When she set her mind to something, nothing was impossible.

Hearing that from her lifted my spirits, although I'm not certain why. I smiled at her. “Right? That's why I doubted that kidnapping stuff. The real reason makes much more sense. Still, fooling the Academy and the Saionji family to make your best friend's wish come true... It's nuts. I don't think you're allowed to call me stupid anymore.”

“Wha...? You don't have to put it like that. You might think it's silly, but it was really important to me...”

“I know, I know. Look, Saionji, when I say something is ridiculous, I'm not trying to say it's wrong. In fact, it's the greatest compliment I can give. I *do* think

it's crazy, but it makes sense to me. I relate to it in a way. It's awesome. So...let me help with your lies."

"Uh...what? What do you...mean?"

"Let's keep this farce going a little longer."

Saionji didn't seem to understand...or maybe she didn't want to. I just grinned at her. It was about time. I'd been relying on Himeji and the simple secure approach of cheating my way to the top. However, that had run its course in a way. I needed to get serious or I'd never win this Game.

A switch flipped in my mind, and I looked back into those ruby eyes with renewed vigor.

"We've kept this up so far. There's no need to ruin it by quitting midway. I haven't accomplished what I came here to do, and I know you don't want to give up yet, either. Didn't you make up that kidnapping because you didn't want Himeji or Sarasa to suffer for your actions? Then what's the harm if I get involved? Unlike them, I'm not your friend, or anything else, really. I'm your accomplice. You're only one. We're both liars, so let me shoulder your burden with you."

"Ah... B-but...!"

"No buts. Don't misunderstand. I'm not saying this for your sake. This whole thing—me as a fake Seven Star and the secret connection to the Saionji family that rules the Academy—is actually really *good* for me. Being discovered will be even more of a risk, but this will give me more info than if I was just another student, and that makes it worth the trouble. So you do it, too, Akabane. Take advantage of me, too. Don't be afraid to. And don't throw it all away just because you can't shoulder it any longer. Let me take half of it instead. Because otherwise...it won't be balanced, right?"

"Shinohara..."

Saionji swallowed, but her eyes remained focused on me. For a while, there was just the sound of our heartbeats in this shell of a building... It felt as though we both got our feelings across, even if we didn't vocalize them. I reached out to Saionji's shoulder. She twitched, retreating a little, but then closed her eyes

and carefully brought her face closer...and closer...closer...

Huh?

“Um...Saionji?”

“Huh?! Wh-what? Was that weird?! I don’t know! This is the first time I’ve ever...”

“Oh, your first time, huh? Even if it is, you won’t be able to stop the blood with your eyes closed.”

“Stop the...?”

“Yeah. Stop the blood. I want to get back in the Game... Or were you talking about something el—?”

“...N-no! No, no, I’ll take care of you, so shut your stupid mouth, Shinohara!”

“Whoa?! ”

Saionji, now bright red, pushed me back. She really should’ve been more careful. I almost got hurt again.

Himeji arrived at the construction site a few minutes later, having tracked the coordinates of my device.

“Let me update you... First, we are approximately forty minutes into the Game. In that time, Mr. Kugasaki has obtained a total of sixteen cards. As a result, there are just two cards left on the playing field—and no information has been revealed about either.”

I fell silent at her defeated voice. However, it wasn’t too surprising. In fact, it’d be weird if I still had wiggle room at this point.

“Okay, I’ll likely be stuck with just the seventeen and fourteen. Kugasaki’s bound to have five high numbers, so I’m totally gonna lose as it stands...but what’re we gonna do now?”

“Yeah, it’s not possible for you to pick up any more cards like this. We need to figure out how to turn this around before the Reveal Phase.”

“Um, wait one minute, please.” Himeji sounded a little hesitant. “Are you two saying...that you’re not giving up yet? All the cheats our Company came up with

have been countered. Nothing we came prepared with has worked... You think we can still pull out a win from this desperate situation?"

""Of course.""

"...Oh..."

Himeji's blue eyes widened a little as Saionji and I gave the same answer. She stood frozen, but swiftly recovered and gave us a light smile, as though overjoyed.

"Heh-heh! I'm surprised. Very, very surprised... I can hardly put it into words. Thank you very much, Master, for making my selfish wish come true."

"Your wish, Yuki?"

"It's nothing, Rina. Don't worry about it. All right, I will put some thought into this, too. If my best friend and my master intend to persevere, then I'd be a failure as a maid if I left it all in your hands."

"Y-your best friend...! Yuki..."

It sounded like Saionji had a complaint in the chamber, but her pout loosened into a smile. I watched the two for a moment, then changed focus to the screen of my device. It displayed a list of the Abilities I'd installed for this Game: Display Bug, Variable Control, and Luck. There was also text outlining how each worked.

I actually had a plan in mind. It was something I had come up with while Saionji patched me up. But first...

"...Hey, Saionji. I want to ask you something: Are there any Abilities that can rewrite the rules of a Game? And if there are, are they pretty well known?"

"Game-rewriting Abilities... Well, there's Rulebreaker. It exists, anyway, and a lot of people know about it, but it's not as all-powerful as you think. The most it can accomplish is altering a few words, and it's only available to Six and Seven Stars."

"Nah, that's okay. The only thing that matters is that it *actually exists*."

"Huh?"

“...Oh, do you mean...?”

Saionji raised an eyebrow, perplexed. Himeji, on the other hand, was attuned enough to potential cheats to catch on right away.

I nodded at them, then laid out my plan for a comeback. There were three keys to making it work: an Ability to change the Game rules, Kugasaki’s ignorance of my Abilities, and his belief that I was a Seven Star.

“Mm...”

As I went into more detail, Saionji’s expression gradually grew sterner. “It’s an all-or-nothing ploy, but it seems worth a shot. Heh. What a surprise. You really have some ridiculous ideas sometimes.”

“Uh...i-is that bad?”

“Oh, I thought *ridiculous* was the greatest compliment a person could give.”

“...Having you flatter me is really scary. Still, we can’t win as it stands. All Display Bug does is mess with device screens. I need to expand it, or update it, I guess, so it has a greater effect. Himeji, how long would it take to add the feature I described? Because honestly, I think this all hinges on whether it’s in time or not.”

“Right...”

Himeji brought her right hand to her lips and calculated something in her mind. Normally, changing Abilities mid-Game was impossible, but that didn’t necessarily include updates to selected ones. That was our tiny little seed of hope, the only way to turn things around.

A few seconds later, Himeji let out a deep breath.

“Yes. If we bring the whole Company together, I think we’ll make it in time for the Reveal Phase... No. Let me correct that. We *will* make it in time.”

“Great. Thanks.”

“Not at all. And...I apologize, Master.”

“Mm?”

“I think...I misjudged your talents.”

Himeji bowed, a little smile on her face. Then she turned away from me, no doubt to contact the Company. Her device was in her hand, and while I watched her tap away...Saionji poked me in the cheek.

“Take that!”

“Huh? ...What was that for?”

“Oh, nothing. I just thought your gaze was a little suspicious. Are you sure this is okay? Remember, if you give up now, you can pin all the blame on me. The deeper you get, the worse it’ll be.”

“Yeah, I know. But I’ve already decided, so stop bringing it up. Getting cold feet now won’t help anyone.”

“Y-yeah, but...”

Saionji’s eyes strayed a bit. Perhaps she was getting anxious now that we’d finalized our plan. After all, there was no turning back if we continued. If my stubbornness caused me to lose to Kugasaki, it’d be akin to destroying the lie she’d spent a year guarding.

“...Ugh.”

But despite that...or perhaps because of it...

“Quit worrying, Akabane. No matter how awful things are, no matter how precarious my situation...that’s nothing but paper-thin truth. We’re about to trick the entire Academy. That’s our outrageous goal...”

...I looked back at her clear ruby eyes and grinned.

“If we can’t even trick a single Five Star, what am I even doing here?”

#

“Ahh, it’s a shame. It’s truly a shame, Hiroto Shinohara.”

We were back at the Principal Athletic Field in the Fourth Ward. Kugasaki, in his jet-black cloak, performed like a stage actor before the crowd of five thousand.

“I assumed you were the victim of a simple accident, but I still had my eye out. You’ve defeated my goddess, after all. I was hoping for more from you.

More from this Game against the man who surpassed my goddess. This contest should have sent my heart soaring. No one was looking forward to this more than me...yet it has ended in such travesty.”

I stood there as Kugasaki ridiculed me, my head hanging. To put it charitably, I looked like I had gone through hell and back. There were bandages all over my body, making it difficult to stand without Himeji (who had received special permission to assist me). And the bad news didn’t stop there. My actual progress in the Game was just as awful.

Kugasaki let out a villainous chuckle as he examined the screen projected from his device.

“You see this, Seven Star? I have five cards in my hand, while you only have two. You cannot win three rounds. This is precisely what I was going for, but to see you fall so completely into my trap feels anticlimactic. Had you only used a level-seven attack or two on me instead of trying to obstruct my progress, perhaps things would’ve turned out differently.”

“...Yeah. That probably would’ve been the best approach.”

I wasn’t really a Seven Star, so that approach wasn’t available to me...but I wasn’t going to tell him that.

“Heh! My strategy won the day. I never intended to win the traditional way. Since my Variable Control level is inferior to yours, a standard approach would never be enough to win. So I took the opposite route. What could help me defeat a superior opponent in this Game? Well, it should dawn on you if you put some thought into it. All I had to do was keep you off the field entirely.”

“Yeah, good point. And you played the first phase perfectly. Responding to a strategy like yours while ignorant of it is tough. Maybe even impossible.”

“Oh, I wouldn’t be so sure of that! I’ve engineered similar surprise attacks on my goddess ten times, and you know how those turned out.”

“...Really?” I said, scowling at the weirdly proud Kugasaki. The previous day, Saionji had mentioned the possibility of Kugasaki using Search. My logic had been that I had to make compromises as a One Star. However, I might have breezed through the first half of this Game had I not gotten tunnel vision.

“...!”

Saionji was seated in the front row of the stands, staring right at us. Kugasaki pushed his glasses up his nose, basking in the attention of his goddess.

“But enough of that. Only one important truth remains—I have *defeated* you. Is that clear to you, so-called strongest on the Academy? Heh-heh! Not that you’ll *own* that title for very much longer.”

The sharp vitriol kept coming, all played up for maximum entertainment value. His declaration was nothing short of a death sentence for me, and not just in terms of losing my Seven Star status. Depending on Masamune Saionji’s decision, I could wind up losing everything.

I kept silent with my head low. Kugasaki snorted.

“*Hmph...* So now what, Shinohara? You have no way to win. Instead of carrying out a Reveal Phase we know the end to, I think it’d be better if you retain honor and resign.”

“Yeah, you might be right,” I answered, trying my hardest to squeeze the words out as I peered up at the arena’s large screen. It showed my and Kugasaki’s hands, confirming my defeat. I gave it a self-deriding chuckle as I ran my finger down my device screen.

I stopped it over the *Discard* button, then tapped it, and my first card disappeared from my display. I did the same with my second card and put my device to sleep before it even finished processing. The half of the arena screen showing my deck suddenly went black.

“...Is this good enough, Kugasaki?”

“Heh... Heh-heh... Ha-ha-ha-ha! Yes, it’s perfect! Now...now victory is mine!!”

Throwing all my cards away was an act that indicated my conceding the match, and Kugasaki was delighted. His joy rang in his laughter and bit into my soul, but I had no way to stop him. I could tell that Himeji beside me was keeping a close watch on the time.

“Hurry up,” she softly urged someone.

“Well, um...all right, then. In that case, as the referee, I’ll make it official.”

Once Kugasaki simmered down from laughing in my face, Kazami, who'd been standing by, finally spoke up. She gave me a quick look, perhaps out of concern, then shook her head and brought her headset mic close to her mouth.

"L-ladies and gentlemen! Allow me to thank each and every one of you for cheering the competitors on through this long contest! Between our news helicopter running into mysterious mechanical issues, all the scrambled video, and Shinohara arriving looking like a Halloween mummy, there have certainly been a lot of bumps along the way! However, the epic battle between this Five Star and this Seven Star has reached its conclusion!!"

Kazami brought out her best broadcaster voice, keeping it light and airy to dispel the disappointment in the stands. She used that cutesy lilt to go over the highlights of this Game, and then, when the tension was at its peak, she finally gave the results.

"All right! The winner of Self-Styled Game #27..."

"..."

I tuned her out, as if her words didn't apply to me. When Kazami finished her sentence, it'd all be set in stone and there'd be no recovering.

I really don't think I can stall any longer, guys...

After a glance at my device's clock, I found myself whispering, "Hurry up... Hurry up..." My feelings were perfectly in sync with Himeji's. Twenty-five minutes had elapsed since the end of the Collect Phase, and it'd be hard to delay things further.

I bit my lip and put a finger to my earpiece while praying.

"Okay, Hiro, all set! Are we in time?!"

"Whoa, ref! Wait a sec!"

"...is Seiran— Whaaaaa—?!!"

A shout from Kagaya cut through the static, prompting me to call out to Kazami, interrupting her. At almost the same time, my device vibrated, the telltale indicator of an update. They had done it. We'd made it by the slimmest margin.

“...Phew...”

Kazami, Kugasaki, and everyone in the audience looked at me with confusion. I took a step forward, waving Himeji away. There was no need to act agonized over my defeat. I began my show with a grin.

“Hey, Kugasaki...do you remember the conditions for ending Self-Styled Game #27?”

“Who do you think I am? Of course I do. Three wins. To be exact, you need more wins than your opponent in the Reveal Phase.”

“No, those are the conditions for victory. I’m asking about what’s necessary for the Game to *end*.”

“To end...?”

Kugasaki grimaced, undoubtedly a little irritated that his proudest moment was being interrupted. He was quiet for a second but spoke up shortly after.

“Hmm... If you’re talking about the Game’s conclusion, it’s when both of us run out of cards, I suppose. That’s when the winner is decided. What are you getting at, Seven Star? Dragging this out when you have no hope is nothing short of pathetic.”

“Drag this on? Ha! You couldn’t be more off the mark.”

That part was long behind us.

I’m sure Kugasaki noticed my sudden change in attitude. He gave me a questioning look. His eyebrows soon shot up, and he reached for his device. He called up the rules for Self-Styled Game #27 on the arena’s large screen. One of the rules sections was titled “End of Game,” yet its contents didn’t quite match what Kugasaki had said.

When either player runs out of cards, the Reveal Phase ends, and whichever player has won more rounds at that point is the victor of Self-Styled Game #27.

“...! What’s this?” Kugasaki muttered when he finished reading. “The Game ends when either one of us runs out of cards? That’s crazy. That can’t be right. That makes my strategy worthless! *Tch*... What’s going on here?! The Game is supposed to end when both sides have run out of cards!”

“Whatever you *think* the rules are supposed to be doesn’t matter. You can see what they are up there. Either you remembered them wrong...or someone messed with them.”

“...What?! S-so... No... You used Rulebreaker?!”

At the suddenly pale Kugasaki’s exclamation, the crowd erupted into conversation. Yes, Rulebreaker—the Ability that Saionji had told me about. That Ability was strong enough to turn this whole thing around.

I stood amid the buzz from the audience and smiled.

“Did you enjoy that small taste of being a winner, Kugasaki? If that’s what the rules say, the Reveal Phase ended when I threw my hand away. And if the winner’s selected at that point in time, then your deck is meaningless. The score’s still tied nothing-nothing. So, Kugasaki, ready for a rematch? Because I’m starting to get excited.”

“Y-youuuu...!!”

Kugasaki’s face twisted in anger. I’m sure he’d never expected this to happen.

“This is nonsense...nonsense! Sheer nonsense! The Collect Phase is the main battle of Self-Styled Game #27! You and I both know that, and I outfoxed you! Why do you have to flip it all over at the last second?!”

“Why? Well, because you underestimated the Reveal Phase. The Collect Phase is important, sure, but it’s not like it decides everything.”

“You...you dirty little bastard!!”

Kugasaki had lost all handle on his anger. He flourished his cape while raging at me...and I got why. After all, as things stood now, I was guaranteed to tie or win no matter what he tried. The tables were truly turned.

Kugasaki’s ranting went on for a bit longer, and somewhere in the middle I caught him watching Saionji in the stands. She meant everything to him. Not just as the Empress, but as a true goddess. If I beat him, he’d never get to play her again. Perhaps he’d just remembered that part of the agreement, because he swished his cloak at me again, this time grinning as the silver frames of his glasses shone in the sun.

“...Heh-heh! Have you forgotten, strongest on the Academy? While I resent this affront, I still have Emergency Call-Up on my side. If we stage a rematch, I can change up the people I ask for help. You can’t expect this to end in a draw forever.”

Confidence dripped from Kugasaki’s every word. This was the brilliance of Seiran Kugasaki the Five Star in action. With three hundred strategies at his disposal, he never had any blind spots to worry about.

“Heh-heh... Ha-ha-ha! Very well! I am not in the business of beating on the injured, but after such an insult, my honor forbids me to back down! You’re on, Seven Star! You will become the stepping stone on my leap to greater heights!”

With a gallant motion (aided by a gust of wind from †Jet-Black Wings†), Kugasaki quickly threw away all his cards, a clear sign he accepted my proposal. Now everything was reset, and we’d move on to a rematch...or so everyone thought.

Ahhh... Thank goodness.

I heaved a mighty sigh of relief. Himeji, watching from nearby, broke her usual silent demeanor by gasping a little. Out of the corner of my eye, I saw Saionji’s mouth open wide in disbelief.

“...Huh? What is it now, Hiroto Shinohara?”

Kugasaki was obviously alarmed by my lack of response. Holding back the laughter gathering in my throat, I pointed straight at the arena screen.

“What is it? Well, I just won.”

“...What?”

“You really should pay more attention to your opponent, Kugasaki. I discarded only one card... Yet you didn’t hesitate to blow through all five.”

The next moment, my darkened half of the screen flipped around to reveal my hand for the first time in the past few minutes. It showed, to all the world, that I had a single card left. That’s right; I’d only dropped one. I’d shut off my device’s screen the moment before it accepted the Discard command, making it appear like I’d relinquished my entire hand.

“Th-that’s impossible!”

Kugasaki blinked helplessly at the bizarre development. He remained stunned for a little while, but snapped out of it and raised his right arm high.

“B-but...you used Rulebreaker to change the rules, didn’t you?! My deck already has no cards in it! No matter how many you have, that won’t affect the score at all! Are you too incompetent to realize that?!”

“Change the rules...? Sorry, but I don’t remember saying I did that. That was your assumption. Understand? I didn’t change the rules. I adjusted your screen display to make it appear like I had.”

“.....Ahh?!”

Kugasaki wailed like he was breathing his last.

How could I actually change the rules? As a One Star, I had no right to do anything like that. I’d merely used Display Bug, which had recently received a timely update to work on large-scale monitors like those used in the arena. I’d only changed two words in the rules shown. The actual rules remained unchanged.

There was hardly any magic to it, but my status (officially, anyway) as a Seven Star was a great mislead. Rulebreaker was an obviously powerful ace in the hole for a Seven Star. The strongest on the Academy was bound to have a hidden weapon or two like that.

That led to Kugasaki’s misread. The rules had never changed. The Game wasn’t going to end until both players were out of cards. He had taken my bait and cast away his whole hand.

“...So...so it was all a performance? You made me believe I had the advantage and acted like you were resigning, yet even Rulebreaker was a feint...? I beat you in strategy and selected Abilities...but you pushed through strictly with acting?!”

“You make it sound like a crime. At least acknowledge my quick wits that carried me to the end. Kugasaki, you lost because you underestimated me. Maybe dominating me in the Collect Phase gave you a big head. It tricked you into thinking there was no way for me to win.”

“Oh...I did? I let my guard down? Me?”

“You sure did. Feel free to regret it your whole life if you can’t accept it. Anyway, it’s the Reveal Phase of Self-Styled Game #27, and I’m playing my seventeen. I won’t use Variable Control, since I don’t need to. What about you? Any cards left to play?”



Kugasaki remained silent, his head low. And silence in this context meant agreement.

“All right, then I win. Of course, it’s a given that I win Games like this one, but still.”

The moment I flashed my smile, a hush settled over the entire field. Then, after a beat, I heard a murmur. I couldn’t make out Saionji’s words, but her pink cheeks trembled like she was about to break into sobs.

A moment later, the air was alive with cheers. Himeji’s exhausted voice caught my ear right before I lost consciousness. All tension left me.

“Great job, Master... You were so cool.”

Tell Me, Himeji! ③



What are the Abilities used in Games?

Abilities can greatly affect the way Games turn out. Players can install three of them per Game, and they're broadly divided into attack, defense, and support types. Your choices are left up to you, so they're an important strategic element of any Game, often becoming the key to victory. My master, however, is restricted to level-one Abilities only.

Ability Types

1. Attack Abilities

These form the core of your strategy. They let you interfere with your opponent, among other things.

Examples: Acceleration, Force Stop, I Control Position Data, Display Bug, Creation: EX

2. Defense Abilities

These block interference from your opponent. They're few in number, but powerful when they pay off.

Examples: Cancel Interference, Reflect, Special Barrier

3. Support Abilities

These provide backup for attack Abilities, Game data rewrites, and more.

Examples: Variable Control, Safety Device, Emergency Call-Up, Luck, Rulebreaker

Ability Strength: The level of your Abilities rises and falls with your rank. The higher your rank, the more powerful the Abilities at your disposal.

General-Purpose Abilities: The most commonly used Abilities, distributed across the Academy. These can become deceptively powerful as their levels rise.

Illegal Abilities: Possessing and using these Abilities is forbidden on the Academy. If you're found with one, it could lead to big problems... What? Me? Oh, I'm fine. They'll never find mine.

Epilogue

#

It was Monday afternoon, the day after my Game with Kugasaki. I was absent from class, resting at one of the island's hospitals. At least, I probably should have been. I was actually back home in my own bed.

I had been taken to a hospital right after the Game ended. Fortunately, the diagnosis was just a collection of light injuries. My numerous lacerations made me look pretty beat-up, but there was no blunt trauma and there were no fractures. I didn't need to stay at the hospital, but I definitely had to rest for a few days. So I'd been lounging in my bedroom since the morning.

"...I have some tea ready, Master."

There was a quiet knock on the door. Himeji entered, wearing her usual maid outfit. She strode up to me leisurely, placed a teacup on my side table, then held her tray against her chest, her silver hair bouncing a bit.

"It's hot. Would you like me to blow on it for you?"

"Huh? N-no, that's fine. I can do that myself."

"But the doctor said you needed to rest as much as possible."

"I might ask you to if I was too injured to breathe, but..."

I sat up and took the cup Himeji had brought. She'd been acting like this since the day before, by the way. At first, she'd glared at me, saying, "I wish you wouldn't make me worry so much" and so on, but now she was practically glued to my side. She even wanted to join me in the bath. I'd had to get Kagaya to intervene to stop that. This was all my fault, so it really wasn't my place to complain, but...

"...It's good."

The straight tea had a light sweetness to it. Himeji gave me an ever-so-slight smile.

“Oh, a get-well gift arrived from Mr. Kugasaki earlier. I was expecting some kind of prank, but it’s just a fruit basket. I’ll peel some of the contents for you later.”

“Kugasaki did that? Huh. Guess even he’s got his sensible side.”

“‘Sensible’? Master, would you like to read the letter the basket came with? Because it’s an epic handwritten narrative that runs to over a hundred pages.”

“Ahhh, um...hmm.”

“I have prepared a summary of the letter, written from my perspective. It’s four sentences long.”

“I love you, Himeji.”

The focus and willpower required to write something long enough for a light novel contest in a single night amazed me. Reading it would probably break me, though. I read over Himeji’s summarized version with great appreciation (my maid was way too talented).

As I reflect on the results, I suppose I must accept that you are worthy of being a Seven Star. However, there is no need to debate whether you outclass my goddess. She is the greatest, the loftiest, the one and absolute. And you...well, you are my rival, at least.

“...”

“...Um, I know this sounds pretty smug of him, but I think Mr. Kugasaki meant all of this as praise. He can be rather...full of himself. Much like Rina.”

“Hmm... That’s fine, I guess, but it sounds like he’s going to stick around and bother me.”

I’d have to find a way to dodge his next Game request. I didn’t plan on losing to him, of course, but dealing with him would definitely be a tremendous hassle. Avoiding a rematch for now was best, if only to reduce the Company’s workload.

I slowly shook my head as I thought this over.

“...Hmm?”

Suddenly, the device by my pillow vibrated. I looked at the screen and saw a text message waiting for me.

“Um... Oh?”

I reached out to check it, but I must have touched the display wrong, because it switched to another screen, my profile. Immediately, I noticed something weird. The star count had previously only included the red star from Saionji, but now it had company. Another star. And by the looks of it, it was Kugasaki's blue star. I'd thought there was no way for me to gain more stars since the system thought I was a Seven Star, but this proved that assumption wrong.

“...”

I squinted a little. *Oh well. The provost probably knows what's going on. I'll ask her later.*

As for the message, it read, *Are you at home, Shinohara? I just happened to be passing by, but I could pay a quick visit if you like. Not that I'm worried about you or anything!*

“It's been a little while, huh, Shinohara? How're you doing?”

A few minutes later, Saionji was in my room.

She wore the same hoodie from two days earlier to disguise herself, which was fine by me. When I told her that only Himeji and I were in my dorm, she flipped her hood back, exposing her flowing red hair. After a moment, she removed the hoodie entirely. She had on her usual Ohga School uniform beneath. Having her in my room felt like a pretty fresh experience.

“Why are you here?” I asked, eyes turned away. “I told you in my message, didn't I? It's nothing serious.”

“Yeah, I heard. But I can't trust you to tell the truth, can I? I wanted to see for myself... I'm glad you're okay.”

She sat down right by me, to the left of the bed. “I'll go get some tea for you, Rina,” Himeji said, as if suddenly remembering. Then she left the room.

Immediately after she was gone, Saionji leaned over and brought her face close to mine.

“You know, Shinohara...there’s something I want to say to you.”

“There is? What?”

“First, about your talent... You’ve been hiding your skills, huh? In yesterday’s Game—in the final comeback, at least—you didn’t use any cheats at all. I don’t think anyone else picked up on it, but that was a One Star pulling off the upset of the year. Honestly...”

“‘Honestly’ what? Are you here to praise me or complain?”

“It’s complicated. Had I been in your position, I seriously doubt I could’ve won. So yes, I think you’re really great... But if I butter you up too much, I feel like it’ll go to your head.”

“...How honest.”

I laughed at Saionji. She frowned a bit, but didn’t seem angry about it.

“So? Is there a second thing?”

“Huh? Oh, right. About yesterday... You only got enthusiastic about continuing the Game after listening to me, right?”

“Yeah, I guess.”

I nodded, not understanding where this was going. Saionji gave a devilish giggle.

“What was that all about? Are you falling for me because I’m trying so hard for my best friend? Did your heart skip a beat? Come on—tell me, tell me, tell me, Shinohara!”

“Sh-shut up...”

Saionji peppered me with questions to the point that I had no choice but to confront my honest feelings. For all her obnoxious prodding...she was almost right. It annoyed me so much. This girl was beyond irritating.

That, and also:

She’s so obnoxiously insightful, too... Ugh.

Why did she feel the need to press this topic? I was fairly certain she was just picking on me, but this was a pretty touchy subject.

To be honest, there was a reason Saionji's lies resonated so much with me. They painted her as a nice person, yes, but that wasn't all. When she'd talked about the kidnapping...it had kind of overlapped with my circumstances. It reminded me of why I had come to this island—those memories of the girl I was searching for. And that link made my emotions well up.

But did I...really have to say so much to this girl, whom I barely even know?

I didn't want to tell Saionji about it...or anyone, really. How could I admit with a straight face that I had come to the Academy chasing after this childhood acquaintance who was my first love?

"Anyway, what about you?" I deflected.

"What do you mean?"

"I mean...if you're just trying to help a friend fulfill her wish, why hatch the kidnapping plot? Don't tell me it's because you're a genius again."

"Oh, um... Heh-heh! I can't tell you that part. It's related to my first love!"

".....Huh. Hey, can you get me the eraser on my desk?"

"Sure... Hey! Why are you so disinterested? Aren't you going to ask any follow-up questions?! That was such a deadpan reaction that I gave you the eraser and everything!"

"Yeah, but...do I really need to hear about your first love? I think my time is better spent grinding down the corners on this eraser."

"Oh, quit lying! You definitely need to! It's a *huge* X factor! The story of my first love's a billion million times cooler than you'll ever be!"

"If you wanna talk about it *that* much, just say so... But even if it's *two* billion million times cooler than me, I'm not interested in hearing about someone I don't know, okay?"

"Ohhhh. Are you getting jealous, Shinohara? Heh-heh! You don't like it when I talk about other boys, do you?"

"Why do you sound so confident about this all of a sudden? In that case, my first love—that childhood friend I mentioned—was several hundred million times cuter than you. So get off your high horse already."

“What?!”

The moment I said that, Saionji’s ruby eyes shot wide, then quickly narrowed into a glare. Obviously, I was exaggerating a bit for the argument, but she was definitely a cute girl. That’s the only way I can describe her because the precise details of her appearance were hazy to me. I was sure she’d match up well against the charming (if only in her face) Saionji.

Not that it even mattered.

Hmm... Our shared lies mean we'll have to keep working together from now on...and that worries me. We couldn't possibly be more incompatible.

I let out a small sigh. We were partners in crime, sure, but we constantly antagonized each other. It was too much. Maybe that more admirable side of Saionji’s, the one she’d shown during my Game with Kugasaki, was just a bonus outlier.

“Ugh... It’s so humiliating to have you treat me like an idiot, Shinohara.”

Ignorant of my thoughts, Saionji puffed out her cheeks and shook her head. I responded with narrowed eyes. She glared right back, and the two of us stared at each other point-blank. Then, as if on cue, we turned away.

That’s when Himeji chose to return. She froze at the door after opening it, not moving an inch as she took in the scene. Then, for some reason, she glowered at us.

“Um... You two sure get along well, don’t you?”

““Get along how?!””

I trusted Himeji more than anyone on the island, but I had no idea how she had come to that conclusion.

b

SHINOHARA’S MASTER PERFORMANCE MAKES IT FOUR

In a match held yesterday afternoon that captured the attention of over twenty thousand viewers, the so-called Phoenix, Five Star Seiran Kugasaki, took on Hiroto Shinohara, the Academy’s newest Seven Star.

...The results hardly need to be repeated here. Capitalizing on his

momentum after handily defeating the Empress, Shinohara once again dispatched a powerful threat. Despite the unforeseen accidents he faced during the Game, his comeback—conducted live in front of packed stands—stunned all who saw it into silence.

With this breathtaking victory, Shinohara has now won four straight Games in his first week on the island, a breakneck pace that's unprecedented in over twenty years of Academy history.

Between his devilish methods and his detached attitude during play, Shinohara's style has already earned him a legion of passionate followers. Let's delve further into the method that's proven so successful for him...

"...Yep. Sounds like a whole big thing."

Natsume Ichinose offered her thoughts on the newest article on LNN. She was in her office at Eimei School, a place normally forbidden to students.

"..."

A girl in a maid uniform entered the room. This girl wasn't one to display her emotions much, but right now, she was clearly in a bad mood. She offered a polite greeting upon arriving, but hoped to abstain from any further conversation.

"It's been a while since we last met, Ms. Evil Vixen. Sorry to keep you."

"...Do you think adding 'Ms.' to it makes it polite or something?"

"No. I'm merely feeling envious of the relationship my best friend and my master are cultivating before my eyes. I don't have time to consider your feelings as well."

"I see. I called you at a bad time, then? Sorry about that. Anyway, take a seat."

"...All right."

Shirayuki Himeji followed the provost's instruction and sat on the sofa. It was soft, but a little too high-end for Shirayuki to feel comfortable.

"Um... So why did you ask for me? I think all the post-Game cleanup has been taken care of."

“Yes, it certainly has. Just think of this as a little information exchange.”

Ichinose spoke slowly as she placed a teacup of unknown make before Shirayuki. The maid beheld it with her clear blue eyes and took a sip to be polite. The tea was so unreasonably good that she cursed the unfairness of it. She’d have to ask Ichinose her secret later.

Grinning as though she’d read Shirayuki’s mind, Ichinose sat on the opposite sofa, crossing her legs alluringly.

“So, Shirayuki, here’s a question for you. Your master, Hiroto Shinohara, has won four Games. What do you think his rank is? His real one, not the pretend one.”

“Huh? Well...his star count can’t increase as long as he pretends to be a Seven Star, so shouldn’t he still be a One Star? I doubt winning four times has suddenly made him a Four Star.”

“Heh-heh! Wrong on both counts. Hiroto Shinohara’s official rank is currently Two Star.”

“...How?” Shirayuki asked. It defied possibility. The system believed he was already at the top. There was no way he could acquire more stars.

“It was news to me, too. This recent Game is the first time it’s happened. I guess Unique Stars operate differently. When he beats someone who possesses a Unique Star, he takes it from them.”

“I see.”

“And naturally, that creates some contradictions. The system forbids Shinohara from gaining any more stars, but he also had to claim Kugasaki’s blue star. This triggered a special case. If a player who can’t earn any more stars beats an opponent with a Unique Star, one of their normal stars is converted into a Unique Star matching the color of their opponent’s. They don’t earn more, but they get an upgrade.”

“...I see. But he...”

“Right. That’s the thing, Shirayuki. Shinohara should be ineligible for that, too. He’s a One Star—and his one is a Unique Star. He doesn’t have any normal

stars. This violates all the cases the system can account for, so he was simply awarded another star. Heh! It's the most outlier of outlier cases. Now Shinohara's a Two Star with a pair of Unique Stars."

"...Right."

Shirayuki seemed less than impressed with Ichinose's impassioned explanation.

"Ha-ha! What? Not interested? Because I find this tremendously exciting."

"Regrettably, I possess more restraint than you. Yes, having two Unique Stars is rare, but even as a Two Star, he'll still need the support of the Company to keep going. So I'm not sure why you're bringing this up with me, to be honest."

"No? Well, take this to its logical conclusion. He's a Two Star with no normal stars. What if he wins a Game against another Unique Star holder?"

"Um... If this happens again, he'll be a Three Star with three colors."

"Right. And what if he does it four—no, five times?"

"You mean, what if he's an all-color Seven Star and he gains one more? But..."

Shirayuki, a little unnerved, tried to refute Ichinose. Now Shirayuki understood the other woman's ferocious smile. Yet no matter how hard she thought, she couldn't think of anything past the "but." To collect so many Unique Stars was unheard of. However, as a pure theoretical, even a Seven Star could use that special case to earn more stars. The result would be an *Eight Star*, something never seen before.

Something aggressive crossed Ichinose's expression when she detected understanding from Shirayuki.

"That's how it looks to me, anyway. You've heard the rumors going around the island, right? For example, any student who goes above and beyond in star hunting will be named heir to the Saionji family, and their corresponding provost will be promoted to director. No Seven Star has reached the necessary heights, so it's all conjecture, but what if an especially talented student decided to go past Seven Star?"

“...Are you saying my master could do this? That... I don't see how it's possible.”

“Don't be so quick to dismiss the idea. He might be cheating his way through this, but he's won four out of four. And one of those was against the Empress, and another was against Seiran Kugasaki. It's sending shock waves up and down the island. Heh... Do you think that's all coincidence, Shirayuki?”

Ichinose's follow-up strike silenced Shirayuki, and the maid sank into contemplation.

Come to think of it...

It was true the Company used cheating to keep him from losing, but he hadn't accomplished anything that would be seen as beyond a Seven Star. In other words, he only used powers he would've possessed were he an actual Seven Star.

The talent he'd displayed at the end of Self-Styled Game #27 was completely beyond what Shirayuki had imagined. The flexibility and creativity needed to use cheats to his advantage... If that was where his true powers lay, there was a chance Ichinose's theory could become fact.

“...Are you saying you foresaw all of this? Is that why you invited my master here?”

“Heh. Who knows? I definitely wanted him on the island badly enough to falsify his test scores. His admissions exam really was awful, but I'm not expecting good grades from Shinohara. His true value lies elsewhere.”

“His true value? Then you brought him because...”

“Yes! I'm using him to further my own designs...but please don't misunderstand. I'm not using him for anything evil, and I'm sure Shinohara's already realized my intentions.”

“...You think so?”

“I do. You could say we're using each other. He has a reason for coming to the island, and he wants to stay here, even if it means faking his social status. Meanwhile, I want to keep a disrupter on Shinohara's level. We have a common

mission.”

“ ...”

Shirayuki let out a small gasp. *Ah, perhaps I’m still underestimating him. Until a few days ago, I didn’t think anyone could stand equally against this vixen.*

“Unfortunately, for all I’ve said, not everything has gone perfectly.” Ichinose chose her words carefully while scrutinizing Shirayuki, maintaining the suspense.

“After all, if that Eight Star theory turns out to be correct, Shinohara’s going to gain many enemies as he builds his star count. Some of them are already moving to take him down, and it’s just a matter of time before they make themselves known. For all we know, he might falter someday, and he’ll never accomplish what he came here to do. The pressure might crush him. There are a lot of obstacles in his way. So what will you do?”



Ichinose shot a testing look at Shirayuki. Her smile indicated how much she enjoyed this, and her attitude could have convinced someone she knew and saw all. Shirayuki almost buckled under the strength of that gaze. However, there was no real issue. Her answer was already set in stone.

With a deep, deep breath, Shirayuki met Ichinose's eyes and spoke with voice unwavering.

"There's need to worry. I will always be by my master's side...no matter what."

AFTERWORD

Hello, good afternoon, or good evening. This is Haruki Kuou.

Thank you very much for picking up this copy of *Liar, Liar: Apparently, the Lying Transfer Student Dominates Games by Cheating*.

How did you like it...? This is the start of my series. The basic genre's "games + lies + school + rom-com"! It's pretty much all the stuff I like rolled into one. Whether you're picking this up after reading *Cross Connect* (my previous series) or reading my work for the first time, I hope that you enjoyed it.

To be honest, this work has its roots in something that I wrote back when I was still trying to sell manuscripts to publishers. It's gone through a *lot* of modification since then. I left it unfinished the first time around, but I liked the setting a lot. Finalizing it is actually a pretty emotional moment for me. I really did it, guys!

Why did I go for another game-based series like my last one, despite all the incomplete ideas I have buzzing around? Honestly, I have no idea (I say, like I'm disconnected from the situation). Maybe if I used this opportunity in my career to create a sweet story of youthful love, that would improve my image a little (not that I've ever written anything like that).

Joking aside, *Liar, Liar* will contain a generous amount of school-oriented scenes. I hope you'll enjoy that aspect of the story, too.

Now for some thanks.

First, thanks to konomi for providing such incredible illustration work after doing the same thing for my last series. The color cover and insert were just so awesomely mind-blowing, and seeing konomi's work ahead of anyone else makes me grin to myself all day about how incredibly marvelous my life is.

My thanks go out to my editor, as well as the editorial department at MF

Bunko J, for all the help they provided. I'm in my second year as a writer and my second series, and I'm plugging away harder than ever. I've got to get out of this rookie mindset...

The final and greatest thanks go to everyone who picked up this book. Thanks for supporting *Liar, Liar!*

Haruki Kuou

Liar, Liar

Apparently, the Lying Transfer Student Dominates Games by Cheating

Hello! This is konomi,
from the Kinokonomi group. 

It's great getting to team
up with Kuou again after
our work together on
Cross Connect! 

I'm super excited to see
how the story develops
from here!!

I hope you'll look
forward to it, too!!

 Special
Thankx 


Haruki Kuou
My editor
Tatsuya Yuuki
and you!
thanxxx



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